Homesteaders, You and I
by green_ola

Summary

Historical fiction set in the Old American West.

Nicole Haught’s dream is to amass enough cash to purchase a farm back East and lead an honest and simple life. Impersonating a man gives her the agency over her destiny that she couldn’t have attained as a woman. She’s been a bounty hunter for over a decade now, inching closer to her goal each year.

Waverly Earp has been abandoned by everyone in her short life, except for her father, Wyatt. They’ve lived in five different Western territories over the past eight years before settling down in Purgatory, MT. The delipidated homestead on the outskirts of town is the closest Waverly has ever had to home and she would do anything to keep it.

It is a story of surviving against all odds and finding home in unexpected people.
Historical fiction is my favorite literary genre and this AU simply begged to be written. Most events I wrote about here had really occurred and most secondary characters are real historical figures. I will likely geek out about them in AN’s after each chapter – specifically about all the bad-ass women from the Wild West era that have sadly been forgotten, while scum like Wyatt Earp are mythologized.

I took literary liberties with having some of these characters meet although they may have not lived in the same geographical area or at the same time. You will also note the X in the dates – I couldn’t decide on the decade, so let’s just assume it was late 19th century and leave it at that.

I located Purgatory in a real-life gold rush town of Zortman, MT, where I worked on a project for two summers a few years back and which is nearly a ghost town now, with less than 100 year-round residents. Let me tell you, that place takes you right back to the Wild West era, so if you ever find yourself in north-central Montana, stop by. I’ll try to attach my pictures of that town in AN’s at the end of some chapters so you can visualize it easier.

The work is complete and the update schedule will be Mondays and Thursdays.

Welcome and share your thoughts but please don’t yell at me for historical inaccuracies – I’m a humble engineer/business owner and wrote this for fun.
March, 18X4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March, 18X4

The night is warm for a late March when Nicole settles her bedrolls down by the campfire on the banks of the Arkansas river. She pulls a copy of a “Wanted” poster out of her breast pocket with the countenance of John Wesley Hardin and a reward listed as $2,000. Walking closer to the fire to take a closer look at the face she has seared in her memory already, she dusts her pants off of the grime of the past 12 hours riding in the plains. Even though she spent her entire adult life out West, she was born and raised in luscious Marion County, AR, and still to this day can’t get used to the arid climate of the West and the never-ending plains.

As she sits down on her bedroll, putting the poster securely away in her vest’s pocket, Nicole checks the pocket watch that once belonged to her father and starts getting ready for bed. After taking off her vest and a thick cotton button-up shirt, she mindlessly unwraps her chest. It’s a long process, one she is quite used to by now living as a man for the past ten years, and she lets her mind wander. Maybe it is the constant and comforting hum of the Arkansas River – more a stream, really, this far into the Colorado Territory – that brings her mind back yet again to her childhood.

Her father’s booming laughter bounces off the walls of their small pigsty. At 6’5”, Cole Haught is a tall, well-built man, with playful brown eyes. His blonde hair is disheveled and – in the afternoon sunlight filtering through the sty’s door – it looks like liquid gold. His brown corduroy pants, patched in places by Nicole’s mother, Margaret, from the years of use, are secured over his immense chest with black suspenders.

Nicole’s older brothers, John Twitty and Silas, rush in to see what all this commotion is about. They both stand by their still chuckling father, letting their eyes adjust to the gloom of the sty, before starting to laugh as well. John Twitty is the oldest and one day will become the spitting image of their father. At 16 years old, he stands almost as tall as their father but is lankier and to his chagrin still can’t seem to grow a proper mustache. He is boisterous, jovial, and always has enough energy to get into trouble, even though he meticulously helps their father on the farm. Silas is four years younger, and as much as John Twitty resembles their father, Silas takes after their mother. Tall – but not nearly as tall as John Twitty – Silas’ blue eyes and red hair betray their Irish heritage. He is calmer, more conscientious and kinder than John Twitty, and his good-natured laughter sounds like liquid honey.

The scene unfolding in front of the three men is the sole reason for their merriment. The youngest of the Haught siblings, Nicole, is entirely covered in mud, clumsily trying to catch a 3-month-old black piglet, which is equally muddy and slippery to boot. Nicole plops herself gracelessly, ass first, in a mud puddle, crossing her arms over her chest with a petulant pout. Her father’s and brothers’ mirth gets her to cast an offended eye in their direction before she looks herself over and shoots a wolfish grin at them, bursting out laughing herself to tears.

Nicole smiles at the memory, putting on the union suit she always sleeps in. Her revolver goes underneath the pile of clothes she just folded that will be used as her pillow. She lies down and as soon as she pulls her Stetson over her face, she drifts off to sleep filled with dreams and half-memories of her childhood.

She’s lying at the back of their wagon, feet dangling off the back axle, and can just barely hear
fragments of her mother’s singing voice over the ruckus of over a 100 travelling wagons. They have been on the West-ward trail for well over 4 months now and she feels restless and antsy. She’s six now – her birthday was just a couple of months ago, already on the trail – and she’s sure she could help her brothers herd their family’s 100-head-count cattle herd along the trail. She’s tall for her age and used to physical labor from climbing trees and helping out at their farm. She frowns as she corrects herself – their old farm.

Her mother says that now that she’s six, she’ll have to start behaving like a lady and when they get to California she will have to start wearing dresses. Nicole doesn’t see the appeal in bunching skirts nor does she understand what is deemed so lady-like about having your entire skeleton, possibly along with your soul, rattled out of your body by sitting in the back of the wagon, “like a lady”.

“Pff, more like a sack of flour!” She scoffs to herself.

Nicole also doesn’t entirely understand why they had to leave their home. They had a farm with acres of rolling hills covered with grass, which sustained a large herd of cattle. Their parents worked hard, sure, but she could also see that they dressed as nicely and smartly as anybody else at their Sunday mass, and there was nothing either she or her brothers wanted for. Just then, she remembers her father’s stories about California – the land flowing with milk and honey, and it makes her temporarily less frustrated.

Her dangling foot is kicked roughly and she lifts up on her elbows to see her brother, John Twitty, riding on the horse right behind their wagon.

“Make yourself useful, little piglet, and go check on Mary Ann and the baby for me,” he grins at her, twisting the ends of the thin mustache he finally managed to grow.

“This damn nickname will never go away,” Nicole thinks to herself.

She’s about to lie down again and ignore her brother, when he says, “Silas can’t herd ‘em all and Mary Ann was complaining of abdominal pain this morning.” John Twitty looks backwards, where about 40 feet away is his wagon with his young wife and their 9-month-old baby. “I know we’ll be at the Mountain Meadows camp soon but I uhm… I’m worried about them…” he says with a level of sincerity and emotion Nicole is not accustomed to.

She rolls her eyes at him because she doesn’t know how to act around this version of her brother. John Twitty has not really been around in the past year since he got married to Mary Ann but the brother she remembers is someone who pulled her braids, threw more mud at her that day two years ago in the pigsty, and proceeded to mercilessly calling her piglet on any and all occasions. She always knew it was the type of relationship they had and there was nothing vicious about it; that’s just how John Twitty showed his affection. She knows because he also taught her to ride a horse in secret, after their mother specifically forbade it, taught her to track rabbits in the forest and catch fish in the stream behind their farm.

So yes, she rolls her eyes because how else would she show him her love but dutifully jumps off the wagon and starts making her way against the traffic of a seemingly never-ending sea of wagons, people, cattle, oxen, and horses. She catches his beaming smile, so similar to their father’s, and a thankful nod of his head, before he’s lost in the hubbub of dust and people.

Before she reaches her brother’s wagon, Nicole hears commotion and screams from the left. Everybody stops and an eerie silence blankets them for a brief moment before all hell breaks loose. She hears gun shots, horses neighing, children’s cries. She hears men yelling “Indians!” and “Red skins!” She hears a roar of a wounded ox, not further than 5 feet away from her. She hears all of this and yet, she is rooted to the spot, frozen, as if in a dream.
Just as a mounted man charges at her with an axe swinging, a vicious sneer on his face, a wagon she was standing by topples sideways, covering her with its canvas cover. Nicole wiggles and feels her legs trapped underneath one of the wagon’s bows yet she stays quiet, not daring to yell for help, not daring to cry, not daring to make a slightest whimper, should she be discovered.

She stays still and quiet for hours on end. The massacre didn’t last longer than maybe half an hour but for Nicole it seemed like an eternity has passed. She tries to think of Californian rivers running with milk and honey. She tries to think about how fun it will be to fish in those rivers with John Twitty, how much Silas will enjoy teaching her to read his favorite books in the green Californian hills, and how Mary Ann’s baby will never want for milk. She even thinks that she will happily go with her mother to have new dresses made for her in town.

It has been uncannily quiet for hours and the night has already fallen but none of this is evident to Nicole. Suddenly, someone cuts the canvas cover that has sheltered her from the massacre. She sees a Native man with long straight black hair and a large intricate bead necklace adorning his naked chest. He smiles at her but –with the large knife he used to cut the canvas still in his hand, reflecting the full moon in its blade –his smile looks ferocious and terrifying to her traumatized brain.

Nicole yells at the top of her lungs.

She stirs in her slumber and her dreams go blank for a second. When she starts dreaming again, she subconsciously notices how the colors look different from the washed-out, nearly sepia-like quality of her previous dream, of her memories. Everything looks vivid now, oversaturated, like the red canyons of the southern Utah Territory.

Nicole yells at the top of her lungs. The man in front of her puts a finger to his mouth in a universal sign for “Be quiet.” She doesn’t relent. She was a coward before, hiding like a child underneath a fallen wagon, when her family and friends were fighting for their lives. She’s six now and she will scream for all she’s worth.

Behind the man with a knife she sees somebody else approaching. She exhales with relief, as she can see that even though this man is dressed in the similar manner to the one with the knife, he is in fact a white man. Nicole smiles at him with pure joy and an overwhelming feeling of deliverance. Yet as he pulls out his hunting knife and slits the throat of the man haunching above her, he recognizes him and his sneer as the man who was charging towards her right before the wagon collapsed over her head. The man who cut the canvas open looks down at her with an utter shock of betrayal before he collapses, his unseeing eyes fixed at her.

“Kuttsu Nakka!” Nicole wakes up with a cry, sitting upright, her union suit completely soaked with sweat. Still breathing harshly, she tries to orient herself; the dawn is almost upon her and she can hear the susurrus of the stream nearby. She lays down again, rubbing her face with her open palms.

“It was only a dream… It was only a dream… Kuttsu Nakka didn’t die that day. Nor did you for that matter so get your shit together…” Nicole murmurs to herself until her heart-rate slows down.

With the daylight fast approaching, Nicole decides to get up and hunt for squirrels or at least find some yucca roots and pine nuts for breakfast and head East towards Dodge City, KS, where she has a hunch John Wesley Hardin is bound for.
“Waverly, honey, when you’re done for the evening come and join me and uncle Curtis, why don’t you?” Her aunt Gus tells her, leaning over the bar before she collects her hat and heads out through the swinging bat-wing doors of the saloon, not waiting for a response.

Aunt Gus is a slight, middle-aged woman, with a salt-and-pepper hair that is shorter than strictly appropriate but she’s also the kind of a woman who doesn’t care much for conventions. As Waverly affectionately watches her aunt walk out of the saloon, she thinks how Aunt Gus and her mama look nothing alike, even though they’re sisters. What does she know, though? She hasn’t seen her mother in 17 years. Waverly shrugs, collects the last few remaining empty glasses off the bar counter, and sets off to wash them, humming unconsciously. She won’t let a stray thought about her estranged mother ruin her good mood.

*Today was a great day, what with the slow traffic through the saloon and the agreeable and ever charming Champ Hardy keeping me company,* Waverly thinks to herself and blushes at the thought of the handsome cow-boy… man… and the few kisses they managed to steal.

She keeps humming as she leaves the saloon, heading for Uncle Curtis’s townhouse just next door. The McCreadys own the only saloon in Purgatory, MT, commonly known as “Shorty’s”, nick-named so based on Uncle Curtis’s unassuming height. It turned out to be the right investment when the news of the gold strike in the Little Rockies hit and the town was transformed seemingly overnight from a little community into a booming gold rush city. That turn of events quickly made Curtis and Gus one of the more influential people in town, which is how eventually they managed to secure the sheriff’s post for her father, after the last lawman walked out of his office one day, never to be seen again.

Waverly glances at the small sheriff’s office across and a bit to the right from Shorty’s. The lights are out and she realizes that is the reason for Aunt Gus’ invitation to join them. Back in Wichita, KS, Wyatt Earp forbade little Waverly from ever learning to ride a horse, after the continuous fighting between him and Waverly’s older sister ultimately drove Wynonna to ride off towards the sunset. At the time, Waverly was too young and naïve to understand why Wynonna was so dismayed with their father working at Uncle James’s saloon. Now, as she looks to the opposite side of the street, right next to the quiet and dark sheriff’s building and a little two-cell jail, she sees the ruckus and dancing in town’s only boardinghouse and she begins to realize that Uncle James’s saloon may have housed an entertainment of a different type than they serve at Shorty’s.

Waverly has been mad at her sister for up and leaving her alone with their father for a lot of reasons, least of which is the fact that she now can’t ride a horse to return to their homestead which lays about four miles east of the booming town of Purgatory, nestled against the Little Rockies.

Putting on the most cheerful smile in her arsenal, the one she used over and over again as they moved from town to town to win the trust and affection of locals, Waverly resigns herself to another fitful night on her aunt’s couch. She typically rides between the homestead and Purgatory with her father, on a little cart Wyatt acquired from one of the disillusioned miners passing through town. She’s certain something important must have held up her father; perhaps he is leading another posse or organizing a raid on one of many illegal mining camps that pop up like mushrooms after the rain down the creak from the Little Rockies.

As she knocks on Aunt Gus’ townhouse door, gun shots reverberate across the street. Alarmed, Waverly looks towards the boardinghouse but she calms down considerably, seeing a pack of inebriated men leaving the establishment and shooting their guns in the air. She bristles, when she spots Champ Hardy being a part of the revelry but her train of thought is momentarily derailed when she sees her father’s friend, John Henry Holliday, commonly known as “Doc” around town, hauling a supremely intoxicated man with a help of one of the boardinghouse girls. The night is dark and the
only source of light are the dim oil lamps in the boardinghouse, but Waverly could swear that the lewd drunk being dragged towards Doc’s dental parlor is none else but Wyatt Earp. His ample mustache, a source of pride of her father’s, is also the most recognizable and distinguishable part of his countenance.

Aunt Gus must have heard the commotion, because the door suddenly opens and Waverly is unceremoniously pulled inside before she has half the mind of either follow Mr. Holliday and his merry party or give a piece of her mind to her supposed beau.

“Oh, honey,” Aunt Gus says, folding her shotgun against her hip and looking at Waverly with a great deal of pity and sorrow but evidently missing any sense of surprise at the behavior of the two most important men in Waverly’s life.

Waverly’s no stranger to pity but the realization that she was kept in the dark by one of very few people who she unequivocally trusted in her life is too overwhelming in the current circumstances. She looks at her aunt in utter disbelief and lets a few stray tears fall down her face before pulling herself together. Her father was never very attentive towards her and she knew he was no saint but Waverly never suspected she idolized him beyond what he deserved. She doesn’t even have the time to think about Champ, who was so kind to her, so outwardly committed in the first months of his courtship.

“That lily-liver, flannel-mouthed, scalawag, piece of shit…” Waverly hears her uncle rant in the hallway. She’s not sure whether he’s talking about her father or Champ but it brings a small smile to her face either way.

With her hand still on Waverly’s elbow, Aunt Gus gently directs her towards the kitchen. “I’ll set the kettle on, my dear.”

As evident by the deep frown lines on her forehead, Waverly is deep in thought that Aunt Gus promptly interrupts before her niece has a chance to spiral out of control. Gus knows that Waverly tends to overthink things, that she spent the majority of her young life playing and spending time alone, creating better worlds in her head than the dreary reality of being abandoned by both her mother and her older sister, and being left at a mercy of a father who could never settle in one town for longer than a few years. Waverly’s been happier – genuinely more radiant with the fake chirpy smiles she hides behind appearing less and less frequently – in the past year than Gus has seen since Wyatt arrived in Purgatory three years ago. Stability is not something that was afforded to Waverly often and if a couple of years on a homestead and Champ Hardy’s courtship provided that, neither Gus nor Curtis were going to badmouth the boy.

It seems like the magic spell was broken tonight, though, and Gus will be damned if she’ll go on pretending like that buckaroo wannabe is good enough for her niece.

“From your acock expression, I take it you weren’t aware of Champ’s… extracurricular activities?”

Waverly can only shake her head sadly.

Nodding to herself, Aunt Gus clears her throat uncomfortably, before marching right on, “And I hope you always remembered our conversation about never… entertaining… gentlemen about two weeks after your monthly and a proper hygiene during and after such… activities?” Aunt Gus swiftly loses the awkward and uncomfortable tone of her voice, as it moves onto something much more akin to anger, “I swear I see that boy visit the hookshop across the street more than I see him put a hard day at work! That place crawls with French pox and…”

“Of course, Aunt Gus! I was always careful...” Terrified and wide-eyed Waverly stops her aunt’s
“My sweet girl…” Her aunt softens considerably and places a gentle, comforting hand on Waverly’s cheek. “It seems like you weren’t even knee-high to a lamb when Wyatt rode into Purgatory with you in tow. With Michelle gone, I felt a great deal of responsibility for you, but now I feel I must have disappointed you greatly.”

“Please don’t say so, Aunt Gus. With you and Uncle Curtis letting me help out at Shorty’s on some days, you ensured I wasn’t constantly alone at the homestead, waiting with dinner for the return of my father, and watching the property become more dilapidated every passing year,” Waverly responds eagerly.

“Thank you for the tea and a place to stay tonight but I am quite exhausted. May I please be excused?” Waverly leaves her aunt and drifts off to sleep on the drawing room’s couch, hearing quiet murmurs of Gus and Curtis discussing Wyatt, the sorry state of the Earp’s homestead, and the future of a young, unmarried Waverly in a harsh reality of the Montana Territory.

Chapter End Notes

A few geeky historical facts:

Mountain Meadows Massacre really happened - an army of Mormons attacked a wagon trail headed to California, killing nearly all 120 people, including women and children. They spared 17 young kids, thinking they wouldn't remember it, oh but they did. The Mormons were dressed as Native Americans and tried blaming the massacre on the band of Southern Paiutes, who were there but did not participate in the killings. The stories told by the surviving children as well as the members of the Southern Paiute tribe confirm that it was the Mormons who were responsible.

John Wesley Hardin was an outlaw, credited of killing anywhere between 27 and 42 people by the age of 24. After serving 17 years in prison, he became a lawyer (!)

Wyatt Earp did work at his brother's brothel for a while - historians to this day argue whether he was a muscle there or a pimp.

I located Purgatory in a real gold-rush town of Zortman in north-central MT, nestled against the Little Rocky Mountains. This is all that is left of a town that once housed a couple thousand people:
April, 18X4

As Nicole half-draggs John Wesley Hardin to the nearest sheriff’s office, his hands bound behind his back, he grovels for her to let him free.

“I never killed anybody who didn’t need killing,” he implores her but somehow she doesn’t see any truth in that statement, on the account of the sheer number of lives Hardin took.

She remains stoic and unrelenting, as they round the corner and the Dodge City’s sheriff’s office comes into view. Hardin, sensing he won’t get any pity from this bounty-hunter, switches tactics; after all, money is all men like this seek.

“I'll double the reward they're offering for my head. Two grand, right? I have a lot of friends who owe me for the… favors… I bestowed upon them,” he grins, showing his yellowing teeth, yet his thin mouth is still slightly downturned.

Nicole pays him no mind and marches him straight into the sheriff’s office. Does the offer sound tempting? Sure, $4,000 would bring her that much closer to her goal – making the trek back East, buying a small farm, not unlike her parents’, and settling down in a relative comfort. But the money is not the only reason she tracks these men relentlessly. The fact that the people responsible for the massacre of her family were never brought to justice set her on a twisted pathway of righteousness.

After collecting the $2,000 bounty, Nicole heads to the closest saloon for a warm meal and a cold drink. The interior of this place is nearly indistinguishable from any other saloon Nicole has ever visited and it makes her instantly comfortable. Wooden walls, one-third covered in a red wallpaper that has seen better days, surround the spacious room. There is a staircase directly opposite of the entrance and Nicole knows she will likely find a room here to sleep in tonight.

After eating the first meal in a long time that didn’t involve a hardtack and something she shot, Nicole allows herself a few drinks that help her feel even more relaxed and content. After the third tumbler of bourbon, she senses someone sliding onto the barstool next to her.

“Hi there, handsome. What’chya doin’ in this wicked little city?” A slender short woman, with a flirtatious smile on her face, asks. Her dark hair is secured in a sophisticated updo and she’s wearing a smart green dress.

She also must be wearing a corset, Nicole realizes, after ogling the woman for far too long.

“Umm…” Nicole stammers, darting her eyes back to the woman’s face, her throat suddenly dry. She drains the tumbler sitting on the counter in one go. “Here finishing some business, ma’am.”

The woman’s smile becomes even more coquettish and Nicole hopes it’s in response to her good manners and not her current flustered state.

“Pearl.” The woman says, adding, “Pearl Hart,” at Nicole’s confused expression.

“Cole Haught. Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Hart,” Nicole responds in kind, taking off her Stetson, and lowering her head in, what she hopes is, a gallant greeting.
The woman – Pearl – seems enraptured by her and motions for the barkeep to serve them more bourbon. The man obliges, with a wolfish grin on his face, which Nicole interprets as lewd and lecherous towards her new companion. Ever chivalrous, Nicole offers that they move their conversation to one of the few unoccupied little round tables around the room.

Pearl beams at her and – leaning closer to Nicole’s ear – suggests in a husky tone they instead go to her room upstairs, where they won’t be interrupted.

In any other situation, Nicole would have comprehended the implication of such an offer and would have politely declined. After all, she understands quite well that the consequences of being discovered as a woman impersonating a man – with all the privilege, liberties, and legal protection bestowed upon men – will be quite dire. But she’s too exhausted from months of tracking Hardin, more than enough drunk on cheap bourbon, and utterly in awe of this beautiful woman taking interest in her.

She follows Pearl up the stairs.

As soon as they enter the room, Pearl pushes Nicole against the door. Her chest flushed with Nicole’s, she kisses her, slowly and sensually at first and then with more fervor. Nicole’s mind goes blank… Pearl’s lips are so soft and so gentle, her body warm and pliant under Nicole’s hands resting on her hips. She’s never kissed anyone before, really, and the way her body responds to this simple act is simultaneously exhilarating and overwhelming.

Pearl quickly becomes exasperated by Nicole’s contentment in simply kissing, and she starts pulling her deeper into the room, towards the bed that sits against a double-hung window. Soft evening light is filtering through, making Pearl look ethereal in Nicole’s eyes.

Without breaking up the kiss, Pearl skillfully takes Nicole’s heavy wool jacket off. Her vest goes next, followed by the suspenders that Pearl simply shrugs off her shoulders and lets them hang off her pants. None of this registers to Nicole, whose brain is blinded by lust and muffled by bourbon.

They reach the bed, Nicole’s back still to the door, when Pearl breaks the kiss and starts undoing the buttons of Nicole’s cotton shirt. Nicole looks on dumbly, first down at the beautiful woman in her arms, then at the fingers that are slowly unbuttoning her shirt, button by button. Pearl traces her delicate hand against Nicole’s chest, still covered by her undershirt, but stops as soon as she feels the heavy wrapping underneath. Her expression changes from coquettish to surprised, her eyes going wide and meeting Nicole’s, and Nicole instantly sobers up and panics.

She takes a step back and drops her eyes to the floor in utter rejection and shame, feeling like the world’s worst scum for deceiving this beautiful creature. Before Nicole has a chance to grab her scattered clothes, she hears Pearl’s scream.

“Joe, no!”

She feels a whack to her head and everything goes black.

x

Nicole comes to slowly, her head feeling heavy, her mouth dry, her eyes not focusing. She feels around herself and can see she’s still in the same little room of the inn. She’s sitting on the floor, her back propped against the bed. There is a small oil lamp burning on an accent table by the door, and judging by the prevalent darkness, hours must have passed since…

“Oh god…” Nicole groans when she remembers the predicament she put herself in. Her mind clears
enough to let herself start to panic again, thinking about potential outcomes and consequences of her irresponsible and foolish actions.

“Hey, you’re finally awake,” a feminine voice says and Nicole registers a person sitting on the bed behind her prone form. A hand lands on her shoulder, softly, almost comfortingly. “Joe really knocked you out cold. I gave you some laudanum to ease up the pain but it must’ve been too much for your skinny frame because you were asleep for hours,” she chuckles.

Turning her pounding head around, Nicole looks up the bed and sees Pearl. Her smile is different now, still sweet but certainly less flirtatious and maybe a bit warmer.

Nicole swallows around a cotton ball in her throat.

“Did he go fetch the marshals?” Nicole faces the door, half expecting the lawmen to walk in any second now and arrest her.

“What’chya mean, hun?” Pearl responds confused from behind her.

“She must think me gullible!” Nicole thinks to herself, quickly amending, “Well, after the events of the evening, she has no reason to think otherwise. She’s probably keeping me here until the law arrives.”

“Ya’know, between all this….” Nicole vaguely points at her torso, “the whack on the head, and the absence of your companion, I am assuming we’re just waiting for somebody to escort me away.”

There is a momentarily silence and Nicole suspects that she nailed it on the head and now Pearl is simply buying time. She does not expect what comes next.

A boisterous guffaw fills the room as Pearl speaks through tears, “Ohhh, hun. Joe is downstairs swindlin’ people at craps. It will be a cold day in hell when Joe voluntarily seeks the company of lawmen.” She catches a breath and lets her laughter die off.

Pearl softens her voice and continues, “You really don’t see what happened here, do you? We’re con artists, dear. Joe finds unsuspectin’ gentlemen, much like yourself…,” Nicole can hear a little smirk in her voice now, “…walkin’ out of the sheriff’s office with a wad of cash from their latest bounty barely concealed in their pouch. They always make their first stop at this rum-hole. That’s where I come in and…,” Nicole can feel more than she can see a little shrug behind her, “entice them… to join me upstairs. Joe takes care of them and we walk away with a few pennies more to our names.”

Nicole’s sluggish brain is trying to race with her runaway thoughts. “Those men… They don’t try to find you the next day?”

Pearl chuckles, “Sweetheart, there is nothing more fragile than a man’s ego. They never see Joe and simply assume that it was all my doin’. They skip town the next day, never wantin’ to admit they were bested by a woman.”

It starts to make sense to Nicole, except for one tiny detail. “Why not rob me just the same, then?”

Pearl smiles down at her warmly, “Our kin must stick together, hun.”

Nicole bristles at being included in the kin she assumes includes con artists, as well as other low-life. Although deep inside she feels a burning shame of being exactly that.

Since they’re still not facing each other, Pearl doesn’t see Nicole’s initial scowl and her following despondent expression, “Us, women, are not given any voice, any agency out here but you and I
both know that the West would still be uninhabited if it weren’t for all the brave women before us. Our legal rights only extend as far as transferrin’ our names, our bodies, and our property to the men who marry us. Many a woman I know, who wanted more from life than being some man’s puppet, turned into less savory occupations, not because of a desire for a whore’s or an outlaw’s life but out of necessity. So no, of course I wouldn’t give you away, hun.”

Nicole suddenly realizes her mistake and nods supportively, as Pearl waxes lyrical about women’s rights movement and its impeding arrival out West. She only flinches once, as Pearl describes the Old West as uninhabited, since – as Nicole experienced first-hand – the West was inhabited by thriving cultures long before the first white men crossed the Mississippi.

As Pearl continues to describe the women’s right struggle – mostly happening back East, but with a few small victories out West as well – Nicole realizes with a burning embarrassment that living a man’s life for the past decade, she had no idea about this revolutionary movement. The ideas of women having the right to own property independently of their husbands, of women running for public offices, of women having the right to vote? She’s ashamed she’s never even considered these things in the realm of possibility – and based on Pearl’s words – soon to be reality.

“God, you still must be drowsy, and look at me goin’ on and on,” Pearl slides off the bed and walks over to the accent table to pour a glass of water. She hands it to Nicole, who accepts it with a small “thank you” and drinks eagerly. She finishes the glass in a few long gulps and hands it back to Pearl, who sets it back on the accent table.

“At a risk of sounding impolite, if you don’t intend on turning me in, why stick around?” Nicole asks, as she feels the heavy cloud slowly dissipate from her brain. She appreciates the unexpected, and somewhat twisted, kindness of this stranger but cannot fathom why she is still here.

Pearl sits back down on the bed, closer to Nicole this time. She says softly, “I wanted to make sure you were all right, hun. But underneath the feeling of guilt, I also had this gnawin’ curiosity as to why you would risk your cover. You must’ve realized where things were headed as we ascended the stairs. There was no other outcome once I took your shirt off. Yet, there you were, completely at my mercy, not even rushin’ things along,” she chuckles. “I guess that was the moment I thought something was wrong, as you let me set the pace the entire time.”

Nicole blushes, honest to god blushes, and hides her face in the palms of her hands. “God, that’s so embarrassing,” comes her muffled groan. She rubs her face with her open palms and hauls herself up the bed, plopping down next to Pearl.

Seeing how Pearl was so upfront with her, laying it all out, Nicole takes a deep breath and decides to respond in kind, with the same level of honesty, “I’d never been… intimate… with anybody. With all the trouble and adventures I found myself in growing up, it couldn’t had been further from my mind. There was also never any pressure from my… family…,” she swallows around the last word, “to find a life companion, so I guess I just never had.”

Nicole ploughs through, “I grew up amongst a Southern Paiute tribe. Always a tomboy, I hadn’t even considered to acquire more feminine attire as I moved away. After a few unsavory happenings with intoxicated men apparently attracted to a woman in man’s clothes, I resolved to making my life easier.”

Instead of grading on her tongue like a washboard, the words flow effortlessly now, liberating.

“I guess at some point I had realized that I was exclusively attracted to the fairer sex. It wasn’t some sweeping recognition, though. It just was who I am,” Nicole chances a sideway glance at Pearl, half expecting an expression of disgust, even though the proverbial cat had long been out the bag.
between them; she’s met with a gentle, encouraging smile instead.

Nicole thinks her words are not making much sense any longer and she becomes pensive. Pearl gently brings her back from her reverie, “And you’d never sought out company of women?”

Waving her hand dismissively, Nicole responds, “There weren’t exactly many opportunities when tracking outlaws. And I do realize there are women in numerous brothels in towns and cities I’d visited along the way, who would be equally discreet and relieved at a prospect of… entertaining me… for a night, but… I don’t know… I guess it won’t ring true to either one of us after the events of this evening, but I’m craving a deeper level of intimacy and companionship than is provided by an hour.”

Pearl laughs with her melodic laughter and Nicole feels lighter. Maybe it’s the soft confessions under the dim light of the oil lamp, or the reassuring presence of Pearl, but Nicole suddenly feels light, deliciously vulnerable, and safe. She thinks these should all be conflicting feelings but they somehow make her feel right in this moment.

It may also have something to do with the dose of laudanum Pearl fixed her with.

After a brief but not uncomfortable silence, Pearl asks, “Where will you go next?”

“Not sure. Was going to replenish my supplies and recuperate in Dodge City for about a week before starting the next hunt,” Nicole shivers at the thought. “Although, riding through the plains in the summer heat for weeks on end does not sound appealing at all.”

Pearl shrieks and claps her hands excitedly, “I have just the perfect idea! My dear friend, Martha Jane Canary – although she prefers to be referred to as Calamity Jane these days –,” Pearl feigns exasperation, “is a bullwhacker. She’ll be leadin’ a wagon train headed for the Black Hills in the Dakota Territory – Deadwood, if my memory serves me right – next week and they are still lookin’ for hands to join. The pay is decent – not as good as bounty rewards, certainly – but you can at least expect a roof over your head and a warm meal each day.”

Nicole considers it for a brief moment. Truth be told, the solitary chase of criminals through the dusty prairies, high deserts, and treacherous canyons of the West, has been wearing her down in the past year. She was hoping to have amassed enough cash to fulfill her dream of settling back East by the time she hit 30, but say what they may, bounty-hunting was not easy money.

Pearl, sensing her indecision, throws in an additional nugget to entice her. Judging from the Cheshire grin adorning her face, she’s been waiting to deliver this final piece of information with a nearly unconstrained glee, “Martha Jane also shares your… proclivities… and is more than experienced in that lifestyle.”

Nicole didn’t even consider there could be other women like her out there and the prospect of meeting one of them seals the deal for her, “All right then.”

Pearl shrieks again and jumps off the bed. “You can stay here and recover from tonight. Joe and I have a room on the other side of town. I’ll go share the news with Martha Jane; I know her favorite waterin’ hole in town and I’m certain she’ll still be there at this hour.”

She straightens and dusts off her dress and petticoat, moving towards the door with an excited vigor.

“...uhm... thank you, Pearl. Really.”

“Anytime, Cole,” Pearl responds, emphasizing her adopted name, sends one last wink in Nicole’s direction, and is out the door.
Nicole exhales deeply and little does she know this is just the beginning of two months of adventure and self-discovery that will forever redefine her, her expectations, and her sense of self-worth.

Waverly is absentmindedly wiping off the bar counter at Shorty’s, which is vacant, as is usual for the early afternoon hour, when men are off panning for gold and women are preparing evening meals.

“Well, vacant may be an incorrect description,” Waverly thinks, glancing towards Champ seated at the end of the long counter, drinking beer, and playing Solitaire with an incomplete pack of cards.

They were still courting, even after Waverly finally mustered enough courage last week to confront Champ about his visits to the boardinghouse. He wasn’t even trying to deny it, telling her – with a feigned patience of a mother explaining something to a small child – that she spent her nights on the homestead, far from town, and it was only natural for him to be taken care of at night. Didn’t she want him to be happy?

Waverly was so surprised and perplexed by his answer that she simply walked out of the room he rented on-and-off upstairs of Shorty’s. Champ must have taken it as a win and thought the argument resolved, since he still spent most of his days at Shorty’s, trying to steal kisses from Waverly whenever they were alone.

The saloon’s bat-wing doors open and Curtis walks in, interrupting Waverly’s ruminations.

“Hi Waverly,” he addresses her cheerfully, and with a stern nod towards the end of the counter, he adds, “Champ.”

“Uncle Curtis! I didn’t think you were coming back from your excursion down South until next week. Aunt Gus will be excited to have you back; she was very antsy not having someone to dot on every waking minute of the day,” Waverly teases.

Curtis laughs at that, his voice booming and boisterous, seemingly coming from his equally large belly. “I’ll be a willing sacrifice to your aunt’s dotting! I came back earlier because old Nacho couldn’t even pull the cart any longer, it filled up so quickly.” He smiles, fondly glancing outside Shorty’s where his faithful mule Nacho is unhurriedly drinking from a water trough.

His expression sours momentarily, “You won’t believe what kind of treasures white folk will trade for dirt cheap! You have a better eye for these things than I do but I truly believe some of the artifacts I brought with me to be hundreds of years old!”

Champ stirs at the mention of treasure, “You think you found something truly precious this time, old man?” Waverly scowls at Champs disrespect towards her uncle; the lines at the bridge of her nose showing her contempt.

“Each cart I tow back home contains unquestionably precious items, young man, but perhaps not in a sense of gold value you seem to only be interested in,” Curtis jabs back. “Now go make yourself useful, boy, and lug these boxes in here. I want Waverly to take a look for me.”

Champ grumbles but grudgingly obliges, understanding well which fights to pick with Curtis.

“Let the boy do the work. I have something else I was meaning to give you, my dear girl, but I have to retrieve it from the townhouse,” Curtis addresses Waverly with affection in his voice, giving her a
kiss on the temple, and barrels out the door.

Waverly stays behind the bar for a minute, overwhelmed by being included in Curtis’s crusade to preserve Native American artifacts. Her father’s constant search for thrills ensured that they lived in five different Western territories over the past eight years. Waverly found passion and some sense of stability and consistency in learning as much as possible about various native tribes they often encountered, including their languages and cultures. The cataloging she’s been doing since she was 14 years old is mostly in her head, as Wyatt always said he wouldn’t waste money on her foolish little hobby. Ink was after all expensive and hard to come by this side of the Missouri River.

“God, there is just so much,” Champ whines from the door, heaving a large, beautifully embellished ceramic pot. “Curtis has a nose for this stuff. He’s kind of like you, um, into the… people of the past and, you know, stuff before today, um…”

“You mean, history and anthropology?” Waverly cannot help the snark and a tiny roll of her eyes.

“Yeah. How can somebody so pretty be so smart, huh?”

Champ’s boyish charm is suddenly doing nothing for Waverly and she cannot believe she fell for it in the first place. She groans but her response to Champ’s rhetorical question is mumbled, as she tries to avoid confrontation, “because they’re not mutually exclusive”.

Champ brings more artifacts into the saloon. Many more ceramic vessels, grinding stones, and all sorts of blankets, beads, and clothing items scatter the room.

Her uncle returns, pleased with Champ’s progress. He holds out a thick notebook, skillfully bound in black leather, towards Waverly. “You know I’m still planning on opening a little museum one day that could display these finds. The native peoples and their cultures are disappearing in front of our eyes and I’d like to preserve even a tiny fraction of it for their posterity and for ours. I’d like you to help me, Waverly.”

After Waverly takes the notebook from her uncle’s hands, he also procures a large flask of ink and a slender box that looks to be housing a fountain pen. Waverly is close to tears.

“I know you have all this knowledge stored in here,” he taps his temple, “but if I’m ever going to make this dream of mine a reality, I will need to start by having someone catalogue all the items I have stored in the townhouse and I can’t think of a better person for the job… If you’ll take it, that is.”

Waverly wipes her eyes off, capturing the tears before they fall. They are happy tears, to be certain; no one has ever believed in her interest in anthropology as much as Uncle Curtis has. She pulls him into a crushing hug, although her arms can barely go around his bulging stomach.

“Thank you, Uncle Curtis,” Waverly whispers, still fighting the tears, “I can’t think of a better gift.”

“Anything, little angel,” Curtis says, little choked up himself. He quickly excuses himself to go stable Nacho.

With a new notebook in hand, Waverly is already thinking about the most efficient ways of cataloging Curtis’s collection. Walking blindly around the saloon, she internally debates between the merits of organizing them by type of the item or the presumed origin and tribe it may have belonged to.

“Cow’s crap! What about chronological order?!” Waverly exclaims, lost in her thoughts. That would make the most sense but she won’t even pretend to have the sort of knowledge of native history and
culture to be able to pull it off.

“Come on, let’s shut that brain off a little while,” Champ pulls her in into his embrace from behind, trying to kiss her neck. Waverly startles, not even realizing he was still there.

“No!” She shrugs him off, “I don’t want my brain shut off! OK?” She explodes. “I want something more than being a barmaid at Shorty’s for the rest of my life… No… We’re done,” Waverly whispers. “Yeah. We’re done, Champ,” she says with more conviction in her voice, feeling bolder and braver than she ever has in her entire life.

Shrugging, Champ doesn’t even seem bothered by this development, which – if she’s being entirely honest – stings a little. Not being worth sticking around for, fighting for, seems to be the prevailing trait of her young life.

“And I’ve got work to do,” Waverly says to his back, the looming task on hand easily pulling her attention from Champ’s retreating form and her abandonment issues.

Chapter End Notes

As promised, here are a few historical facts:

The thing Hardin says to Nicole (“I never killed anybody who didn’t need killing”) is an actual quote of his, which is perplexing based on the kill count he's accredited with.

Pearl Hart was a Canadian-born American outlaw, who was a prime example of women taking their lives in their hands. She left her abusive husband in her early 20s and headed out West, where she lived a life of a con artist. She was heavily influenced by the suffrage movement. Rest assured, this is not the last we see of Pearl in this story!
June, 18X4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June, 18X4

Aunt Gus had to make an impromptu trip to Malta after a family of whistle pigs chew holes in their flour bags and she asked Waverly to man Shorty’s. Typically, Waverly would be attending the Sunday mass right around now with most of the town’s families. Her father always found an excuse not to visit church – many said he’d made a pact with the devil himself – but Waverly suspected his lack of faith to be much less sinister. Thus, the responsibility to maintain the Earp’s good name and reputation fell, more often than not, on Waverly’s shoulders. And – make no mistake – your absence from one too many church services could turn you into a town’s pariah faster than a greased lightning.

And that’s how on this hot, sunny Sunday noon, Waverly finds herself behind the bar counter at Shorty’s. The air is sweltering today and she’s happy for the little reprieve provided by the cool interior of the saloon, even if she has to continuously swat the irksome flies and gnats with her bar rag, like a cow on the prairie.

The saloon is entirely empty except for Waverly; Champ hasn’t bothered speaking to her again and moved out of the upstairs room last week. She’s certain he must have run out of money after being jobless for too many consecutive months.

All the signs suggest that Champ Hardy was never even a remotely decent match for her, and Waverly can be honest enough with herself to admit she only let him court her for this long out of a bone-crushing insecurity and desolate loneliness. She readies multiple glasswares, getting prepared for what she’s sure will be a busy afternoon, with parched church-goers hankering for a drink.

Just as she walks around the counter to straighten the barstool, the bat-wing doors of the saloon squeak, startling Waverly. She accidentally knocks a pint glass off the counter, shattering it into hundreds little shards. As Pike Landusky, a lawman from the town over the hills known for his short temper, strolls into the saloon, Waverly sends an apologetic and slightly embarrassed smile his way.

Pike is a bear of a man, at 6’4” and nearly 250 lbs, he towers over most men in the Little Rocky Mountain range. He reminds Waverly of mythological trolls, his face hideously disfigured by a bullet he took in the jaw during one of his many gunfights. With his reputation even worse than her father’s – after all, people claimed Pike was the devil incarnate – she’s not surprised to see him missing the Sunday mass.

He still hasn’t even looked at her and based on his unsteady, heavy footfalls, Waverly can now see that he has already imbibed generously, even though it couldn’t have been a minute past high noon.

He clumsily unclasps and drops his gunbelt, holstering his Colt six-shooter and extra cartridges, on a nearby chair. Waverly can hear him mumbling something about “these damn Logan boys,” and briefly wonders what sort of personal vendetta Pike’s on this time. The Logan brothers are a hard-working and well-spoken bunch, even though the oldest – Kid Curry, as people call him around town – is a sweet-talker who Aunt Gus warned her about quite often.

The clink of glass shards being swiped by Waverly onto a dustpan brings him out of his murky musings. Despite his booze-addled brain and wobbly steps, he’s on her in three short steps.
Roughly tugging her around, Pike pushes Waverly against the bar; the counter painfully digging into Waverly’s ribs. She is dumbfounded and petrified by his aggression and brutish man-handling; the situation triggering her mind to involuntarily think of the night when she was four and three armed men entered her family’s cabin in the evening, accusing her father of stealing their horses, and – in the ensuing commotion – accidentally shooting her oldest sister, Willa.

The fear paralyzes her; she’s quiet and doesn’t struggle, as she cannot comprehend what is happening when Pike bunches up her skirts and ferociously tugs her drawers down.

He’s right behind her, his pungent stench of sweat and cheap bourbon thick and nauseating. Half muttering – half barking, he slurs, “If the scum as crooked as dog’s hind legs like Kid Curry can sweet-talk his way to my daughter’s bedchambers, I will have my fun with this little plaything, before dragging his body behind my horse…”

The reality of what is about to happen hits Waverly like a freight train, kickstarting her into a defensive fight, with all the fierceness and ferociousness that her tiny body can procure.

This particular dusty heat, specific to the North-Western plains, has Nicole hoping she had stayed in the cool Black Hills of the Dakota Territory a few more months. It’s hot enough that rattlesnakes lazily bask in the middle of the horse trail, unperturbed by her presence or her horse’s hoofs. She wishes she could take her cotton shirt off and just ride in her undershirt but regardless of the fact she hasn’t encountered a living soul in two days’ time, she’s not willing to risk it. Sweat is barreling down her torso, certainly making her undershirt wet, and making the bindings underneath it so much more visible. With her destination – the Little Rocky Mountains – clearly visible in close distance, Nicole presses on.

She spent a month helping out on a wagon train, where Calamity Jane took her under her wings. Under her tutelage, Nicole discovered a whole new world of women like her, women who loved other women. She learned minute details of women’s apparel and their behavior that pointed towards this shared secret, and – at an expense of a great amount of glee from Jane – she was astounded to grasp the sheer number of women who lived that life respectably. As long as no outwardly affection was shared between them in public, the society was quick to disregard two women living together as nothing more than innocuous spinsters. In fact, it was prevalent enough that a relationship of two unmarried women living together earned its own wildly known term – a Boston marriage.

Parting ways with Jane was bittersweet. Even though they shared numerous intimate physical nights together, their relationship was not even remotely romantic but rather rooted in a deep friendship instead. Between her discovery of ubiquity of Sapphic women and her sexual awakening, Nicole feels born anew. She has a new air of confidence and swagger she didn’t know she lacked, and she is now hopefully optimistic that she will find a woman to share her life with one day.

Jane’s parting gift to her was a pointer to head to Purgatory in Montana Territory – where the Free Homestead Act made acquiring property that much more affordable – and to inquire about one Mary Katherine Horony. Mary was Jane’s old acquaintance and would certainly help Nicole settle in.

Nicole was well aware of the strings attached to the Free Homestead Act; to obtain the deed for a 320-acre property, one had to prove up the land for five years. Not only did that include building functioning structures and living on the property, but also actively irrigating the land. The inherently arid landscape of the territory didn’t yield itself to being comfortably habitable without irrigation.
Nicole had some money saved up from years of bounty-hunting; it wasn’t nearly enough to purchase a farm back East, but it would be sufficient to put in all the required improvements on a homestead in Montana Territory to earn her the land deed. No, Nicole didn’t worry about the money; the more daunting task would be to singlehandedly maintain such a vast property, what with the main house, a barn, a shed, and a few more auxiliary buildings needed, as well as an orchard, a small vegetable garden, and a chicken coup, not to mention a cattle herd, a couple of horses, and perhaps an ox. Even with a comfortable financial cushion left over after proving up the land, Nicole could scarcely rely on it to permanently hire ranch hands. Her plan instead was to find someone to partner with on a land claim and she was hoping Mary Katherine would help her find the right partner.

The sun is at the zenith when Nicole rides into Purgatory. The town feels unexpectedly deserted for a supposedly booming gold-rush destination; an ominous tumbleweed swipes across her path. As Nicole approaches a saloon on the left side of a wide, well-traveled main street, she hears a bell in the distance and spots a picturesque little white church hiding behind shrubs on a hill right ahead.

“Townsfolk must be at the Sunday mass,” she recons.

Dismounting her loyal brown-and-white pinto horse, Nedley, she pats him on the neck and ties him off to the hitching rail in front of the saloon. Nedley is parched, ducking his head immediately into the water trough, and Nicole wholeheartedly empathizes with him and hopes there is a barmaid in this saloon who can serve her a tall glass of water.

Relying on good first impressions and appreciating the impact a proper attire can have in these situations, she takes out her vest from her saddle bag and slips it on her sweat-stained shirt.

She walks towards the bat-wing doors of the saloon, the heels of her boots thumping on the wooden boardwalk. Taking off her Stetson, Nicole puts on a charming smile – one that she’s developed in the month spent with Calamity Jane – and walks through the door. She hears a scuffle, her eyes taking time to adjust after hours of riding in the blinding sun.

The saloon consists of a small room with a bar to her left and a few scattered small round tables, and a partition leading off to the right to what looks like a larger dining hall. She can now see a burly man folded over a short, slender brunette, pushing her against the counter. The girl is clearly struggling to get out from underneath him – this strongly indicating her lack of consent, even though Nicole can’t see her face from this angle – but the match is plainly inequitable, with the man towering at least a foot above her.

Within five seconds of Nicole walking past that door and barely having enough time for her eyes to adjust to the indoor light, the man spots her and reaches at his hip, presumably to retrieve his gun. Nicole is glad he doesn’t find it there; she’s a fast draw but she wasn’t prepared to walk into a gunfight, her mind fully set on making a good first impression in a new town. Realizing his mistake, he leaves the girl in a panting heap on the floor and charges towards Nicole, reaching her in a couple of strides, his massive paws swinging.

At 5’9”, Nicole is tall for a woman but this bloke’s nearly a head taller than her. She dodges the first couple of his blows and can distinctly smell cheap bourbon on him from this distance, giving her the advantage over his stumbling form. Mustering ample momentum, she lands a few hooks to his midsection, which – except for a few irritated grunts – do nothing to the giant, as if her punches were some mere nagging mosquito bites.

Her luck runs thin, as his fists finally start meeting his targets; Nicole feels the air knocked out of her as he punches her square in the chest. She stumbles a few steps backwards, and – since they were slowly circling each other – her back meets the harsh bar counter, as the man is now standing by the entrance. Half expecting him to just take his exit now that he’s right by the door, she allows a deep
breath to fill her battered lungs. Instead, the bear of a man lunges towards a little round table sitting by the door hoisting – Nicole realizes belatedly – a gunbelt. He immediately fires his Colt and – drawing a split second later than him – Nicole responds in kind, just as she feels a raging blaze hit her lowest left rib.

Yelping, she slides down the bar on impact, excruciating pain enveloping her torso. Her shaking right hand is still instinctively pointing the gun in the man’s direction, before she registers that he is now lying flat on his back, a puddle of blood collecting on the dusty wood floor.

Nicole lets her hand fall to the ground.

Through her ringing ears, she vaguely hears the whimpers from the girl slouched on the floor over her knees, not two feet away from Nicole. She’s so close, Nicole is sure she could extend her arm and touch her but the idea is preposterous – her left arm seems on fire and she’s not sure that the gesture would offer any comfort to the girl.

Deciding to forego the action for now and thinking of volunteering some soothing words of comfort and consolation instead as soon as her brain shakes off the trauma of the past five minutes, Nicole sits her gun down on the floor and gingerly feels around her abdomen, fearing to find it stained with blood already, and hoping the bullet went straight through. Sensing only dry fabric of her vest, a relieved sigh leaves her mouth, as Nicole pats herself more firmly, her hand landing on her father’s old pocket watch, secured on a chain in its rightful place – her vest’s pocket. She digs the watch out and cannot believe her luck; a 0.45 caliber bullet is lodged into the shattered face of the timepiece, protruding through the caseback like some kind of a tragic Cupid’s arrow.

Dumbly looking at the fractured watch in her hand, Nicole can’t help but wonder how was she saved from a certain death by sheer luck, coincidence, and an inanimate object appearing at the right spot at the right time. “Yet again,” she pensively adds, thinking back to the wagon that collapsed over her younger self, inadvertently saving her life from the massacre that took her family.

Her introspections are cut short, as the saloon’s doors are kicked open, and in walks a mustachioed man, a sheriff’s badge prominent on his chest.

“Thank god it’s the law,” Nicole murmurs to herself, not feeling up for any more surprises in this hellhole of a town.

The man takes in the scene carefully, coolly looking at the dead body at his feet by the door, moving on to look at the two figures crouched on the floor against the bar, “Waverly?” he whispers.

The girl next to Nicole stirs, crying more openly, little hiccups interrupting her words, “Daddy!... Daddy, he came in when I was,” hiccup, “alone, and he tried to,” hiccup, “he tried to…”

It’s the first time since crossing the threshold that Nicole gets a good look at the girl’s countenance. The front of her light ash brown hair is pinned up on top of her head, the rest of it freely flowing in a wavy mane down her shoulders. Her heart-shaped face, ruddy cheeks, and light brown eyes should make her appear rather plain, yet in this moment the girl looks nothing if not angelic to Nicole. It’s highly inappropriate, she knows, but Nicole can’t help but stare at the girl with, what she’s sure must be, a very dimwitted smile on her face.

Staring at the girl – Waverly, she remembers the man saying – Nicole doesn’t see the cool expression of the sheriff’s face slipping away, replaced by red-hot fury. She Yelp, half in surprise, half from pain in her chest, as the man lifts her off the floor by the lapels of her vest. “What the hell,” Nicole thinks briefly, before looking around and comprehending how the current position of each one of the three bodies in the room must be giving the wrong type of impression to someone who just walked in
Her gun lays abandoned where she left it on the floor and she lifts up her hands in a universal sign of surrender. “Sir, there must be…” Nicole tries to placate the sheriff but her words are completely lost as he tosses her towards the entry door and the real attacker’s body.

She scrambles off her knees, seeing Waverly behind the sheriff stop crying and looking on with large eyes, like a deer staring down an arrowhead. The sheriff must be far too gone in his rage, looking for any outlet to his burning indignation, yelling, “you scumbag!” while he punches Nicole straight in the jaw. The blow is powerful enough to send her flying through the bat-wing door, her prone form landing on the wooden boardwalk outside with a heavy thud, knocking her out cold.

Waverly hears her father fume, “you scumbag!” at the young stranger who saved her life before assaulting him with all his might. That seems to pull Waverly out of her stupor; she stops crying, stands up fully, pulls her drawers up, and runs outside to stop her father from killing the man. She hangs on his dominant arm as he tries to take another swing and cries at him that it wasn’t this stranger, it was the “mean devil” Pike now lying in a puddle of his own blood.

Wyatt seems utterly surprised at the inability to throw another punch and looks down at his right elbow being held by small hands; his eyes follow the thin arms up to his daughter’s face. “Waverly,” he lets out, sounding like a whisper, a prayer, deliverance. He drops his arm, slowly realizing his mistake.

In the corner of her eye, Waverly sees John Henry leave the boardinghouse, hastily pulling his suspenders onto his shoulders, and making an urgent approach towards them.

“Look the man over for me, Doc,” her father requests of John Henry, before turning around and marching back inside Shorty’s, Waverly close on his heel.

She can see a crowd amassing on the boardwalk; the church must have let out, leaving dozens of women in their Sunday bests to gawk outside of Shorty’s, trying to stay cool by means of the foldable hand fans, morbid curiosity preventing them from making a retreat to the refreshing coolness of their cabins and houses.

She hears Doc yell towards the boardinghouse, “have Big Nose Kate bring me some of her smellin’ vials!”. Stranger’s chin in his hands, Doc looks his face over, shaking his head and murmuring something else Waverly doesn’t quite catch.

Meanwhile, her father hauls Pike’s body under the armpits and drags him outside, huffing with the fatigue, leaving Waverly alone in the saloon staring at a trail of blood left behind. There are more men outside now who eagerly help Wyatt load Pike’s body onto his cart. Waverly blanches thinking how she’ll have no choice but to return to the homestead tonight on that same cart. The men saddle their horses and lead a rowdy, galloping procession – Waverly assumes – to bury Pike’s body in his hometown over the hill, leaving a large cloud of dust in their wake.

Waverly looks down at the floor, where a discarded Stetson lies, and bends down to pick it up and dust it off. It’s well-worn and must belong to the stranger currently propped up against the hitching rail post. The man looks young but the outside light exposes the soft few wrinkles around his eyes, mouth, and forehead, and Waverly thinks he must be older than she initially assumed, perhaps in his
mid- to late-20s. He still hasn’t come to and this peaceful lack of consciousness is adding a hint of femininity to his thin, soft face. The strands of his red hair that must have been slicked backwards are now falling in a disheveled manner over his face, reaching well past his ears to his jawline. Still peering at the stranger’s face from the safety of the saloon, Waverly winces at the blood oozing from his split brow and a dark bruise forming beneath his left eye.

Mary Kate — or Big Nose Kate, as the customers of the boardinghouse inexplicably refer to as — crouches down by the redhead, placing a small vial underneath his nose. The stranger comes to groggily, looking around. Seeing his dazed, brown eyes, Waverly decides to walk outside to — offer the man his hat back? thank him? apologize for her father’s outburst? — she’s not exactly sure what.

She stands a few steps behind Mary Kate, fidgeting with the Stetson still in her hands. She sees a gaggle of townswomen looking her way — some with pity, more with a nod of respect and a comforting presence. They are already gossiping about how Pike finally met his maker, talking about how Sheriff Earp will certainly dig his grave six feet deeper than is strictly customary; some even claiming that they saw the men haul heavy boulders and stone slabs with them to cover the grave with, preventing the “mean devil” from ever returning. Waverly can also hear bits and pieces referring to the stranger as a hero and young and handsome and fearless, whispered in high-pitched voices behind their foldable fans.

“Darlin’, you should have this looked at,” brings Waverly’s attention back to the stranger and Mary Kate who is hovering her hand over his brow.

He’s sitting more upright now, struggling to respond, before looking up and meeting Waverly’s eyes. “Water, if you’d be so kind?” he requests in a scratchy voice, sending her a dimpled smile that seems out of place on his battered face.

Waverly still can’t seem to find her voice and so she just nods and rushes back inside Shorty’s, the Stetson she meant to give back still in her hands. Entering, she spots Aunt Gus scrubbing the last remnants of the blood off the wood floors; Waverly hasn’t even noticed her return and the view brings her to a sudden halt. She’s fixated on the bloody rag and the sudsy water in the bucket.

Standing up from her knees, Gus notices Waverly. “Are you quite all right, Waverly? I heard what happened, I’m so sorry you were all alone…”

Waverly looks up at her aunt, back down at the wet patch of wood, and violently retches into the bucket. Emptying her stomach makes her feel simultaneously better and like crawling in a ball and quietly crying for hours. Gus holds her against her chest, petting her hair, and softly humming a vaguely comforting melody.

“Mary Kate Horony,” Waverly hears introductions made outside, followed by an astounded, “I’m actually here to see you!” from the stranger on the ground. Mary Kate’s coquettish laughter reaches Waverly’s ears, “That’s what all the new miner boys tell me!”.

Gus looks above Waverly’s head to where Big Nose Kate is flirtatiously talking with the young stranger who saved her niece. Holding Waverly at arms-length, she looks at her like she’s searching for an answer to some unasked question, and whatever she sees, springs her into action.

With the air of the no-nonsense attitude so characteristics of her aunt, Gus marches outside, “I’m Gus McCready and that was my niece you saved there, Mr.…”

“Haught. Cole Haught.”

“Well, Mr. Haught, we don’t often get to see those kinds of self-righteous heroic acts ‘round these
parts. You have my thanks,” Waverly hears her aunt say, before she announces, “We have a room upstairs that we rent out occasionally and it just so happens to be currently unoccupied, if you so wished to stay and recover from your injuries.”

From her position deeper in the saloon, Waverly can no longer see the stranger’s face but there must be some hesitation in his expression, as her aunt hurriedly adds, “First month free of charge, of course, on the account of what you did here today.”

Waverly doesn’t wait for the stranger’s response, before slipping out through the backdoor.

Chapter End Notes

Pike Landusky was a miner and a sheriff in the Little Rockies - a town over the hills from Zortman carries his name to this day, although it houses less than 20 year-long residents now. He really was a large dude and was quick to anger. He was actually shot in a bar fight by none else but Harvey Logan, aka Kid Curry. People say the fight broke out because Harvey was courting Pike's daughter. Landusky was Kid Curry's first kill and afterwards Kid joined the Wild Bunch alongside Sundance Kid and Butch Cassidy. They often used the Little Rockies as a hideout.

You can still visit Landusky's grave as you drive into the town of Landusky and - I kid you not - it still has large rocks placed over it, since people really thought he was the "mean devil" and thought it would help keep him buried. Guess it tells you something about how awful the guy must have been.

Boston Marriage is a real term of the time!

To help you visualize how Purgatory looks like in my story, here's a picture of the "saloon" - and if you squint and look to the right, there is a little white church on the hill.
July, 18X4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

July, 18X4

After Mrs. McCready cleaned Nicole’s busted brow, they walked the staircase leading from the back of the saloon to an upstairs room. The older woman insisted on checking her torso as well but Nicole politely declined, feigning indifference as well as lack of necessity; after all, what could really be done about bruised ribs except rest and let them heal; and thus, Mrs. McCready relented. Nicole didn’t even get a chance to properly look around the room before succumbing to sleep.

Waking up in an unfamiliar space, it takes Nicole a few minutes to remember the events of the previous day. A soft whisper of light – entering through two large double-hung windows – is tinting the room in a grayish-orange hue, indicating the advent of a new day. The walls are painted light blue, with the window and door moldings left perfectly white. A coat rack by the door, a wooden chest of drawers, a wardrobe opposite the bed, a toilet table with a washstand, and a short bedside table complete the room’s furniture. There is a glass of water on the nightstand – Nicole notices when she’s scanning her surroundings, sending a quiet, grateful thanks to Mrs. McCready.

When Nicole startles awake again, hours must have passed since she first awoke, judging from the warm bright light in the room. The soft knocking on the door must be what woke her up. “Come in,” she croaks.

“You’ll have to let me in, I don’t have the key on me,” comes Mrs. McCready’s voice.

Nicole struggles to get up, her torso achy and burning. Once on her feet, another discomfort makes itself known; she fell asleep with her chest bindings still on and as a consequence her breasts are now sore and tender. She makes a few unsteady steps and unlocks the door.

Mrs. McCready stands there with a breakfast tray of boiled eggs, cold bread, sausages, fried potatoes, and a cup of steaming hot coffee. The woman seems to never smile but her expression is friendly regardless; Nicole doesn’t even want to consider what it would be like to experience her disapproval, as she politely lets her in. Mrs. McCready turns right from the door where a cozy nook that Nicole has’t noticed thus far hosts a little round table with two chairs.

After setting the tray on the table, Mrs. McCready examines Nicole’s brow. “It’s stayed closed. Good,” she observes with an approving nod. After a beat she adds, pointing at the table, “Sit down, Mr. Haught, and eat some breakfast. You got me worried there for an instant, what with sleeping like the dead for 19 hours straight.”

Leaving the door slightly ajar, Nicole gratefully takes a seat and starts eating. She hasn’t noticed how hungry she was until now; the plain meal tasting like heavens on her tongue, the eggs hard boiled just how she likes them. Wolfing down the food, Nicole realizes her behavior must be very disrespectful to the woman still standing by the table. Quickly swallowing a forkful of potatoes and looking up sheepishly, Nicole offers, “My apologies, Mrs. McCready. Please, take a seat?”

To her credit, the older woman doesn’t appear offended and waves Nicole off, a ghost of a smile manifesting on her stern countenance. Taking a seat across from Nicole, she studies her quietly as Nicole sips the strong black coffee. Nicole is not surprised to discover that Mrs. McCready is a woman of a few words. She briefly thinks that she should feel uncomfortable under the intense
scrutiny but Mrs. McCready’s steady presence makes her surprisingly at ease. She shoves another forkful of potatoes into her mouth, followed by a sizeable bite of sausage.

“Was Ms. Horony correct to assume you came here in search of the gold hidden in these hills, young man?” Mrs. McCready asks, unreadable expression on her face.

Nicole swallows, “No, ma’am. I’m looking to acquire a lot of land under the Free Homestead Act.”

If Mrs. McCready is surprised, she doesn’t show it. “A farmer then. It’s a noble but arduous profession, Mr. Haught, especially in these parts. Maintaining the irrigation ditches feels like a Sisyphean task to many, but without them you won’t be able to support a family with more than a few cattle and all but a tiny plot of garden. As you will soon learn, the summers here are sweltering and winters - bitterly cold, and sustaining the entirety of 320 acres by oneself might as well be a deadly undertaking.”

“I am well aware, Mrs. McCready, and I am not averse to physical labor. I was actually hoping to find a partner to stake a claim with.”

With a firm, respectful nod, Mrs. McCready continues, “Well then! I’ll keep my eyes and ears open for anyone who may fit the shoe. Although I must warn you that most of the young men ‘round here don’t stick around for long, either striking it rich in the hills or – more often than not – leaving broke and disgruntled.” Lost in thought, she nods to herself a few more times. “Allow me to also forewarn you about the cattle barons, as they like to call themselves. Despicable lot! They pray on young hopeful men, much like yourself, Mr. Haught. Wait for them to put in all the hard work required to prove up the land and swoop in at the lowest, most gruesome point, offering to buy off the land for 50 cents an acre! If you do decide to homestead, don’t let nobody cheat you out of your land, Mr. Haught.”

Endeared by the older woman’s kindness and concern, Nicole thanks her appreciatively. Their conversation tapers off, allowing Nicole to finish her breakfast.

After a few more comfortable minutes of silence, Nicole asks, “After everything that happened yesterday… how is your niece? Is she okay?”

“She’s not,” Mrs. McCready gives her an affronted look.

Before Nicole can profusely apologize because she surely didn’t intend to diminish yesterday’s ordeal for the young barmaid, Mrs. McCready adds, “She’s not okay but she will be. God only knows that this girl’s experienced more anguish and heartbreak than most of us will ever know in our lives.” She shrugs, “But she’s strong. Like her mama before her, she’s a Gibson, and us Gibson women are a resilient lot… Don’t get me wrong, Mr. Haught, we all have a breaking point but that wasn’t *it* for Waverly.

Sensing the love and fierce protectiveness in Mrs. McCready’s words, Nicole is happy the young girl has someone looking out for her, being there for her after such a violent experience. “If I can do anything…” Nicole trails off.

“You just get yourself back together, young man. You both got hurt by Pike. And while Waverly’s wounds may not be physical like yours, they will take time to heal just the same.”

Mrs. McCready collects the empty breakfast tray, and walking towards the door, she adds, “Stay out of trouble for the next few days and let those bruised ribs rest. I’ll bring you a dinner plate in the evening.” And with a little nod, she’s gone.
Nicole smiles to herself because that woman sure is something else. She locks the door behind Mrs. McCreedy, sits back down on the bed, and unwraps her chest with a relieved sigh. Once her breasts are free, she gingerly feels around her lower ribs where a dreadful bruise is already turning dark purple. It’s tender to the touch but the pain is manageable and Nicole is confident her ribs are not broken – small mercies and silver linings.

The same scenario repeats itself over the next few days. Mrs. McCreedy brings her two meals a day, respectfully knocking on the door before being let in, around the same time each day so Nicole develops a sense of routine that enables her to feel comfortable in the room, keeping her chest bindings off majority of the time. The time drags like the molasses in the winter though and Nicole’s only entertainment in those few days are conversations with Mrs. McCreedy when she has some time to spare from the work downstairs, and the local gazette she brings Nicole with dinner.

After five days of this idle torture, Nicole is going stir crazy and decides to chance a short descent down the stairs for breakfast. Her ribs are healing fast, the bruise now appearing worse than it actually feels, but the hike down the stairs still leaves her panting with a dull ache.

After turning the corner from the staircase, she notices the young barmaid – Waverly – she reminds herself, working in an efficient blur serving the morning rush of customers. Nicole makes an eye contact with her and sends a genuine, dimpled smile her way but the girl looks startled by her presence, turns on her heel, and dashes out the backdoor.

Nicole frowns, wondering what could have caused such an extreme reaction from the girl, hoping her presence in the saloon is not being associated with what that man tried to do to Waverly, triggering the painful memories. Curiously, Mrs. McCready rolls her eyes at her niece and hollers at Nicole to find a seat and give her 10 minutes to prepare her a plate.

The floor is crowded with miners and cowboys to boot, all the small tables in the barroom taken. Nicole walks into the larger room on the left, only to see a dozen or so long tables, all occupied as well. Scanning the room, she notices one table not as packed as the rest and walks towards it with the air of confidence.

“Mind if I join you? This place is as busy as a hen with fifteen chickens in a barnyard.” She sends the table a smug self-assured smile for good measure.

There are five occupants at the table, all dressed in cowboy garb; two middle-aged men are sitting close to each other on one end of the table, facing a muscular black man, a thin youngster, and a fidgety man resembling inhabitants of British India. The latter hastily clears their table, “Yes! Yeah. Please join us.”

“Jeremy,” the black man chastises. Looking up at Nicole, he says, “You must be the famous Cole Haught. It will be our pleasure to share our table with you, after the favor you did us all by cutting down the mean devil Pike.” His manner of speech is formal and his expression stern and unreadable.

Nicole wants to object it was all due to coincidence and good luck but decides against it, seeing how it may buy her cheap goodwill. She nods in thanks and takes a seat across the young fidgety man who first spoke to her.
“Name’s Xavier, but my friends call me Dolls. These are Jeremy, Robin,” the muscular man introduces them, and pointing across the table to the two men sitting next to her, adds, “Fish and Levi.”

After Mrs. McCready brings her a breakfast tray with a fresh cup of coffee, Nicole learns that the men all work at the Jones’s ranch, herding his cattle down South in the winter towards better pastures, and helping as ranch hands in the summer. Jeremy and Robin are the most talkative and optimistic of the bunch, perhaps on account of their young age, while Dolls, Fish, and Levi are stoically quiet, yet she decides she likes this peculiar group of cowboys, as their conversation flows easily. She inquires whether they know anyone wanting to stake a new homestead claim and they apologetically tell her that homesteading is not quite as popular as it used to be.

A large grandfather clock standing in the corner of the dining hall strikes 7 in the morning, causing a large uprising of bodies, as everybody piles out to start their day, a few men more eagerly than others. Her companions all leave with friendly goodbyes on their lips, as Dolls quietly offers, “join us tomorrow for breakfast too, if you’d like, Cole.” He clasps her on the shoulder and without waiting for a response, he’s gone.

After the dust settles, Mrs. McCready brings her another cup of coffee and yesterday’s gazette and Nicole stays in the dining hall for another hour, reading the local and national news columns – a habit she developed in her years of bounty-hunting.

For the next several mornings, Nicole shares breakfast with the five cowboys and she feels the bounds of friendship already forming. Today, they are gossiping about Sheriff Earp and the pact he supposedly made with the devil. They each tell progressively more unbelievable stories of gunfights Wyatt participated in, many of his allies losing their lives or at least being wounded – his dear friend Doc Holliday getting shot being a prime example here – while Wyatt came out unscathed.

Nicole only half listens to the tall tales about Sheriff Earp, her focus beckoned by Waverly working behind the counter again. She’s been avoiding her and Nicole really tries not to take that personally and provide Waverly as much space as she can possibly need, but she can also admit to herself that this rejection stings a little. She’s trying to explain the pull and protectiveness she feels towards the girl as a result of the trauma they shared yet she’s not entirely sure she buys it either.

Robin and Jeremy are now fighting over whether it was six or twelve men Wyatt fought off with Doc’s help in the Long Branch Saloon in Dodge City, when Nicole interrupts their bickering.

“Waverly – she’s Wyatt’s daughter, right?” Nicole addresses the table, although her eyes are still tracking the girl’s every move behind the bar. She barely catches Dolls looking between her and Waverly, with an almost-there smirk on his face.

“Waverly? Yes, she’s an Earp all right although you’d be hard-pressed to find any similarities between her and Wyatt,” Fish offers.

Jeremy picks up the thread, “She’s a sweetheart! The most popular girl in town! There actually was a contest last year that she won, blue ribbon and all.” Jeremy laughs.

“In all seriousness, you won’t find a kinder woman in all of Purgatory. We don’t know all that much about her, since she moved here with her father only, what is it? two? three? years ago now, but she’s always there to offer you a smile and a kind word,” Levi adds.

“And she makes mean hard-boiled eggs,” Fish provides, nodding his head approvingly.

“Good thing she dumped that lazy Hardy. That girl deserves the world,” Robin concludes to a
The conversation ebbs and flows, as Nicole’s sole focus is industriously serving customers and tirelessly avoiding eye contact with the her.

Waverly knows she has been avoiding Cole Haught since his first appearance at breakfast last week. That first morning, she was simply surprised to see him; Aunt Gus told her that the young man will surely take at least another week of rest before venturing downstairs. Yet there he was, smiling at her from the bottom of the staircase, and she simply panicked and bolted away.

Today, Waverly’s brave enough to steal fleeting glances at him, as he’s sharing yet another morning with the Jones’s crew. Cole seems to be fitting right in with the group and she’s glad these are the boys he found to associate with.

Although she still occasionally feels his heavy gaze on her, he surprisingly hasn’t attempted to approach her again. Waverly doesn’t know whether she should feel relieved or upset with this turn of events.

Aunt Gus catches her line of sight and gently walks Waverly by her elbow to the backroom. “I know that Mr. Haught’s presence may be bringing back some memories you’d rather not think about but it would only be polite to engage in a small conversation with him now and again. He wasn’t responsible for your assault, you know?, and talking with him might actually help you process things easier,” Aunt Gus tells her with the unique flavor of tough-love attitude.

Waverly hides her face in the palms of the hands. “God. I know, Aunt Gus… I know! I must appear completely rude to him now! It’s just… It’s not what you think – at first, I was startled by his presence, sure. But I wanted to thank him… I just didn’t… didn’t know what to say?”

Her aunt gives her an encouraging smile and so Waverly continues, “And then I was looking at the way he struggled down the stairs those first few days, and I thought – it’s my fault! The man was beaten then shot at by Pike, all because he walked into Shorty’s at the wrong time and stood up for me. And then?! My own father pummeled him half-way to death!” Waverly almost yells now, a few tears flowing down her face. “Meanwhile, there I was, not a hair off my head,” she adds more calmly, almost in a whisper.

This seems a tad too much for Aunt Gus, who sits her down on a beer crate and tells her in no uncertain terms, “Anybody walking through that door would have done the same, were they even half the man Mr. Haught is. Waverly, dear, you must realize that a man taking a few punches to his face is not comparable to the sort of abuse you were about to experience by Pike’s hands.”

She lets the words sink in before continuing, “Don’t underestimate the significance of your emotional trauma because there’s a lot of men out there who will gladly do that for you. And please believe me when I say I am certain that the last thing Mr. Haught would want is for you to have a survivor’s guilt.”

Waverly takes her aunt’s words to heart and as Cole Haught is leaving the dining hall later that morning, she meets his eyes for the first time and sends him a little smile and a wave. She resolves to finally talking to Cole the next opportunity she has.

The opportunity, however, is not very keen on presenting itself. The next couple of days Waverly
has to tend to the little vegetable garden at the homestead, wrist-deep in dirt, harvesting the spring
crop of both beets and carrots. Her lower back is alternating between a dull ache and shooting pains
but she knows she has to finish collecting the crops soon; the growing season in the Montana
Territory is considerably shorter than elsewhere in the Union and if she doesn’t sow the new seeds
by the end of the week, the chances are their autumn crops will get a frostbite.

x

Back at Shorty’s the next morning, Waverly washes the dishes her aunt collected from the floor of
the dining hall after the breakfast rush ended. She’s happy with the progress she’s made in the
garden; all beets and all but two rows of carrots are now safely stocked in the cool pantry shed.
She’ll have to pickle the beets by the end of the month but that’s certainly a problem for another day.

Today, Waverly’s ready to tackle another pickle she’s put herself in and finally talk with Cole
Haught. He typically stays in the dining hall after everyone’s done with breakfast, drinking his coffee
and quietly reading the local gazette. Aunt Gus is going over Shorty’s books at her desk in the corner
of the backroom so Waverly knows that Cole hasn’t gotten his second coffee today yet, leaving her
with a perfect opportunity.

Just as she grabs the hot pot of coffee, the doors to the saloon squeak open and in walks Waverly’s
father. Sitting the pot down on the stove, she sends him an inquiring look; Wyatt Earp is routinely
gruff and grouchy this early in the morning, locking himself up at the sheriff’s office, and preferring
for Waverly to bring him breakfast and coffee after 9 am. She doesn’t want to poke the proverbial
grumpy bear and simply stands behind the bar, waiting for him to speak first. He barely just sends
her a curt nod and a quiet, “Waverly”, as a means of a greeting and walks through to the dining hall.

Waverly hopes to god, or whoever else will listen, that her father is not here to speak with Cole
Haught. She thinks he’s already made a lasting impression on the man and him talking with Cole
could only spell trouble. Quick on her feet, she grabs a rag, and moves further down the counter,
pretending to wipe it, while getting a better vantage point to keep an eye on the two.

Cole is immersed in his reading, his face hidden by the large newspaper spread, as her father’s back
temporarily obscures Waverly’s sight. Wyatt sits down across from him without as much as a
greeting not to mention an invitation, the chair scrapping the wood floor too loudly in the quiet of a
post-breakfast dining hall.

Cole jumps a bit in surprise and Waverly can see him blanch as soon as he becomes aware of
Wyatt’s presence. He swallows hard and addresses her father, “Sir?”

Waverly suddenly realizes this might as well be the first time the two of them spoke since Cole’s
arrival in Purgatory and Waverly winces in sympathy thinking how uncomfortable this encounter
must feel to the young man.

Wyatt responds, “Morning, son,” and pointing to the gazette in Cole’s hands he adds, “You know
how to read?” Waverly expected her father to be short and to the point, yet this was a strange non
sequitur, even for him.

To his credit, Cole appears non-phased by the inquiry, and keeping the eye-contact, he responds,
“Yessir.”
Her father nods, seemingly pleased. “Do you know how to write, too?”

“I do, sir. Yes.”

His right elbow on the table, wrist laid against the surface, fingers tapping the wood without a rhythm, Wyatt appears lost in thought, still nodding to himself. “See, son,” he continues, “I need someone to help me with the books at the station. My daughter tells me my record keeping is atrocious.”

At the mention of Waverly’s name, Cole lifts his gaze above Wyatt’s shoulders and meets Waverly’s eyes, just as she rolls hers in response to her father’s comments. She hopes the playful gesture will help bring him more at ease.

Cole looks back at Wyatt, waiting for him to continue. “I can’t have given the job to Waverly, talented as she is around pen and paper, even though she was eager to help. Sheriff’s office is a place unbecoming of a young woman, I’m sure you understand. Seeing how you are literate yourself, young man, and have proved yourself to be quite righteous and principled”, Wyatt continues, twisting his long mustache with his left hand and clearing his throat uncomfortably, “I figured, the job’s yours if you want it.”

Now, that certainly makes the list of top 10 most unexpected moves her father’s made in his life, and Wyatt is nothing if not unpredictable. Waverly chances a look at Cole’s face, which is now pulled in deliberation, two vertical lines marring his forehead.

“It’s very… generous… of you to offer, sir, with me being a practical stranger and all,” Cole begins carefully. “With all due respect, I came to Purgatory with a different goal in mind, and to be completely honest, after spending nearly a decade as a bounty-hunter, a life of a lawman has little appeal to me.” Hastily, he adds, “Sir.”

“One of the miner lot, then,” her father responds and interrupts Cole with a wave of his hand, just as he opens his mouth to speak. “Listen, son. I’m trying to do well by you, as a personal thanks. I’ll only need your assistance twice, maybe thrice a week, if we’re busy, and the rest of your time you can spend however the hell you wish. The pay’s good too; you’ll get $2.75 a day, which is more that most boys bring in gold dust from the hills in a week these days. And I know my sister-in-law charges an arm and a leg for the room upstairs, so you’ll need cash on hand if you plan on sticking around.”

Cole ponders on the offer for a minute, before extending his hand over the table and saying, “You’ve got yourself a new employee, Sheriff Earp.”

Chapter End Notes

The Free Homestead Act was responsible for populating many of the Western states and ultimately is what turned states like MT into grazing heavens for large cattle operations.

They really offered Sheriff's and Deputy's positions to nearly anyone who volunteered. That's how Wyatt became a sheriff in the first place, even though he had run-ins with the law before (and even afterwards).

There was too much happening in the previous chapter for me to go into Martha Jane Canary aka Calamity Jane. So here goes...
She was quite a character and worked almost any job available to women before finally becoming a scout for the US Army at Fort Russel, WY, and doubling as a prostitute at Fort Laramie. (Guess that tells you how valued women's work for the army was at the time.) Eventually, she found a gig with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Throughout her life, she tried to create a mythos of Calamity Jane, much in a way that Wyatt created his own. The difference being that people believed Wyatt's tall-tales and he is to this day mythologized, while Calamity Jane is nothing more than a butt of a joke or at the most - a cat in a show featuring other Old West characters.

Here, have a picture of Jane. How fly was she?! And that tie!
August, 18X4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August, 18X4

Coming back to Shorty’s for an early lunch, Nicole stops in her tracks at the saloon’s bat-wing doors, leaning against the doorframe. Waverly Earp is working behind the counter, humming softly to herself. The bar floor is deserted this early in the day, quite a few hours after the breakfast rush. She’s a vision, Nicole thinks – soft smile, warm eyes, fluid movements.

Nicole’s been keeping her distance to allow Waverly space but lately she’s found herself on a receiving end of her smiles more and more often. Nicole decides to finally be brave and steps into the saloon, the squeaky doors announcing her presence.

Waverly starts and grabs her chest in a frightened stance.

Stalled in her movements, both hands raised in a placating gesture, Nicole asks with concern evident in her voice, “You okay?”

“Yeah. I, uh, just a bit jumpy,” Waverly sends her a smile, easing Nicole’s worry. She’s certain of the reasons for Waverly’s apprehension at being ambushed alone at the saloon but from what she’s observed over the past two months and little bits of insights Mrs. McCready provided, it appears that the girl is dealing well with the trauma of the assault.

Nicole takes Waverly’s friendly attitude as a good omen and – taking her Stetson off – struts confidently deeper into the saloon, her signature dimpled grin fully on display. “I’ve been, uh, I’ve been meaning to introduce myself.” She shoves her arm across the counter in a greeting, feeling a fool yet projecting nothing but self-assurance, “I’m Cole. Cole Haught.”

“Hi,” comes Waverly’s quiet yet cheerful response, as she takes the proffered hand. Her handshake is stronger than Nicole expected, adding to the girl’s appeal.

“And you are Waverly Earp. Quite a popular girl around here,” Nicole continues, too nervous to let Waverly speak. They break the handshake, Nicole already missing the contact, however fleeting it was.

“Oh, you know, it’s all in the smile and wave,” Waverly responds and – as if she wasn’t already endearing enough – demonstrates a small adorable motion with her hand. Nicole feels completely disarmed in this girl’s presence, as she continues to stand there, all puppy eyes, smiling like a dimwit.

Pointing at the metal star adorning Nicole’s chest, Waverly breaks the uncomfortable silence, “So I hear congratulations are in order, Deputy Haught.”

“Oh!” Nicole exclaims, surprised. She’s never been one for forms of endearment, but Waverly makes it almost impossible to be on guard.

“Uhmm… My father… Sheriff Earp that is… mentioned you’ll be working at the office with him? I thought he’d deputize you…” Waverly clarifies cautiously, seemingly trying not to offend Nicole.

“Oh! Oh, yes, of course,” Nicole nods furiously and looks down at the star on her chest. “It’s all still pretty new to me, to be perfectly honest,” she shrugs. Looking back up at Waverly, Nicole decides to share, “There appears to be a backlog of cases needed recording as well as multiple blank spots in
the accounts. It all seems a bit overwhelming at the moment.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out, Deputy Haught,” Waverly encourages with a warm smile. “All those files need is to simply be recorded in a chronological order and indexed by the name of the felon and the crime… uhm… committed…” Waverly trails off, blushing and bashfully looking down at her hands, although Nicole cannot fathom why the girl would be suddenly so timid, when not a second ago she was speaking confidently about matters that racked Nicole’s brain for the past week, with little success.

Before she gets a chance to continue the conversation, Mrs. McCready walks in from the backroom. Nicole leans over the bar and conspiratorially whispers to Waverly, “You seem to know your ways around files, Ms. Earp, and I’d love to pick your brains more one day, if you’ll let me.”

With one last smile, she lets Waverly off the hook and faces the older woman, “Good morning, Mrs. McCready. Any chance I could get an early lunch today?”

“Most certainly, young man,” Mrs. McCready responds. Clasping a hand over her niece’s shoulder, she says, “Waverly, dear, go finish the stew and bring some out with cornbread for Deputy Haught.” Still blushing from their earlier exchange, Waverly acquiesces quickly and leaves for the backroom.

Mrs. McCready pats the counter, “Why don’t you sit at the bar, Deputy Haught? I’m curious to hear about your progress with finding someone to partner with on a claim.”

Nicole takes a seat on a barstool, setting her Stetson down on the counter, “I appreciate your concern, Mrs. McCready. My search so far has turned out just as much as your inquiries around town did. Although… I did talk at length with Ms. Horony today and she did promise to probe around the… boardinghouse and its… patrons.” Nicole scratches the back of her neck nervously, feeling apprehension at being unfairly judged by Mrs. McCready for associating with the clientele of the town’s only brothel.

To her credit, Mrs. McCready seems delighted, emphasizing it with a loud clap of her palm against the counter, “That’s a mighty good idea! The boardinghouse is a place frequented by many young men, some of whom surely have cash to spend yet no clear direction of what to do with it. I’ve always suspected that they often squander their hard-earned money on booze and women on account of it being the path of least resistance.”

Mrs. McCready continues to astonish Nicole, who gratefully nods in response. They change the subject and discuss Nicole’s new station at the sheriff’s office.

x

The next afternoon, Nicole is at the office, tirelessly filing down reports from the past week’s arrests. She is slowly getting a hold of this job, internally thanking Waverly for unwittingly setting her on the right path; filing the cases chronologically and indexing them by name and crime type is such an elegant solution and she’s already submitted a requisition for a card file cabinet to keep the records well-organized.

Just as she starts looking over the reports of inexplicably mutilated cattle found on Jones’s ranch, Sheriff Earp walks through the door. Nicole hasn’t seen him in two days. If anyone inquired about the sheriff’s whereabouts, Lonnie and Charlie – the other two deputies – advised her to claim he was
gone on an *official business*, while heavily insinuating he was in fact holed up at the brothel.

“Sheriff,” she greats him with a polite yet reserved nod.

“Ah! Cole! Just who I was looking for! Come, join me in my office, son,” Wyatt says, already walking towards his door.

Her desk clock indicates a few minutes after 4 o’clock and she knows she won’t be able to finish carding through the reports she wanted to get done today, but sheriff’s comment sounded more like an order than an invitation, and so she complies.

When she enters his private office, Wyatt is already reclining in the desk chair, a habit she is sure will one day result in the chair’s back wooden legs breaking under his weight. She takes the chair opposite his desk.

“I’ll cut straight to the chase, Cole. I was talking with my dear friend Doc Holliday last night and he informed me you were in Purgatory looking for a partner to stake a claim on a homestead. I was certain he was mistaken, as I was under the impression you were driven here by the promise of quick riches hiding in the hills for those lucky enough to strike gold, but Doc assured me he had his information from a trustworthy account. Is this true, son?” Wyatt’s face is unreadable, as he drops the chair’s front legs down, bending over his desk on his elbows in an ever so slightly aggressive position.

“Uhm…” Nicole mumbles, trying to buy precious seconds to evaluate the situation properly. She’s not sure how the word got to the sheriff… On second thought though, the brothel seems to be the common denominator between Wyatt, Doc, and Big Nose Kate.

Nicole can’t perceive any reason why Wyatt would be opposed to her becoming a homesteader and she’s never actually lied to him about her plans – it was all his assumptions. She decides to bite the bullet and respond truthfully and without further delay, knowing that hesitation is often equated to spinelessness in Sheriff Earp’s eyes. “Yes, sir. Mr. Holliday is correct.”

Sitting up and slapping his hand on his lap, Wyatt seems greatly pleased with Nicole’s answer. “Your arrival in Purgatory may just be the most serendipitous event in my life, and I’ll have you know I’ve cheated death on multiple occasions!”

Relieved to see a cheerful response from the man, Nicole is relieved, if not a bit confused with the turn of events. She knows luck smiled down at them when she walked into Shorty’s that fateful day almost two months ago, but somehow she also knows this is not what Wyatt is talking about.

The perplexity must show on her face, as the sheriff continues with even a larger grin, “See, son, I own a homestead on the outskirts of town that I put a claim on nearly three-and-a-half years ago. Beautiful piece of land! Nice refreshing stream in the back and very few rock outcrops in the fields. Regardless! My post turned out to be more… *demanding*… than I’d anticipated and I have little to no time left to maintain the place.”

Nicole can see where this is going but needs to hear it from Wyatt. “Sir?”

“God, you are too respectful for your own good! I am offering you a partnership opportunity on my homestead. To be fair, there is plenty of work that needs to be completed by the end of the next year in terms of proving up the land but if you can manage to do so, I’ll sign off 50% of the claim to your name.”

Wyatt seems thrilled with the idea, yet Nicole is not sure the offer would really benefit her. “Thank
you for the offer, sir. I’ll have to consider it."

“What’s there to consider, son?! It’s a fair offer and I can tell you right now you won’t find a single person wanting to get into homesteading in this town. Judging by your expression, you have some hesitation about it – let’s hear it! If it weren’t for your ever-so-slight Southern drawl, I could swear you were Canadian, what with all this unnecessary well-mannered courteousness!"

Wyatt’s voice is raised now but his jabs are good natured. Still, Nicole does her best to express her concerns without offending the man whose employment she came to rely upon, “With all due respect, sir, the only reason I’m looking for a partner is to have the help necessary to prove up and maintain all 320 acres of a homestead… I’ve experienced first-hand how demanding this job is of you, sir, and I’d be cautious getting myself into a situation where all the responsibilities of running a homestead were on my shoulders.”

“Ha! There it is!” Wyatt exclaims, slapping the desk with his right hand. “See, son, I’ve never said I’d be the one helping you out there, have I?” Pausing, Nicole suspects solely for a dramatic effect and not really to give her the time to answer this rhetorical question, Wyatt continues, “My daughter, Waverly, spends majority of the time on the homestead. She’s already caring for the vegetable garden and the orchard, and she’s been drilling a hole in my stomach about building a chicken coop. Not to mention the housekeeping duties that come to her like second nature now – you’d always have a warm meal and a clean shirt to wear, living under my roof, boy.” Pleased with himself, Wyatt twists and twirls his mustache.

“Then, perhaps, I should discuss this matter with Waverly, to make sure she’d be comfortable with having a stranger in her home,” frowning, Nicole responds reflexively.

This, apparently, was not the right thing to say. “The land is mine and Waverly’s opinion has little significance on my offer!!” Wyatt fumes, his face turning red in an instance.

Nicole flinches; having been on the receiving end of the sheriff’s wrath, she’s not eager to experience it again. Nonetheless, she’s also been in Purgatory long enough to know that Wyatt is fast to anger and even faster to simmer down, thus she calmly places both of her hands, palms down, on his desk and waits.

The tactic seems to work, as within a few short seconds Wyatt takes a deep breath and rubs his forehead, saying, “Look, Cole… You are an upstanding young man and you’ve already made an everlasting impression on this town with little acts of support and aid you bestow upon people of all walks of life. If I swindled you in a land deal, I’m sure as hell the townsfolk would take your side over mine in a heartbeat. This is not what this offer is…” He takes another deep breath, exhaling with a sigh, “Waverly loves that dilapidated piece of land and this scruffy town; this is the most stability this child’s experienced since her mama left us and I think you may be the last option left for me to not let her down again and allow the homestead to get to the state of such a disrepair that the government rescinds the deed.”

Wow, talk about a guilt-trip!

Wyatt wears the most solemn, almost vulnerable expression, Nicole has ever seen on the man. “I’ll do it,” Nicole says with a conviction she didn’t know she had.

Worst thing that can happen is that I prove up the land, Wyatt gets the deed in a year and a half, and I just move on to a new claim, if things are not working out. A little investment of my time and money will be worth it in the end, if it will make Waverly happy, Nicole thinks to herself, even more surprised with how much the girl came to mean to her.
Sheriff’s face transforms slowly from a thoughtful frown into a toothy grin, giving the Cheshire cat a run for its money. He gets up and extends his hand towards Nicole, in a gesture of sealing a deal, “Good choice, son! Just don’t… uhm,” he coughs awkwardly, “don’t mention this conversation to Waverly… I want her to keep her innocence and the naïve trust in this world a bit longer, and the longer she stays in a blissful ignorance about the very real possibility of losing the homestead, the better.”

He’s still shaking her hand and all Nicole can do is just nod in acquiescence.

x

That evening, after having dinner at the Jones’s boys’ table, Dolls offers they get some drinks at his cabin. The other four cowboys already have plans of going up to a mining camp deeper in the mountains for a monthly men’s dance, and they tease Dolls about being lonely without them yet not wanting to join in the festivities. Dolls’ only response is an inaudible murmur and something about the fifth wheel.

Nicole doesn’t know what a men’s dance is but she doesn’t ask and simply enjoys the easy banter between the friends. She agrees to have drinks with Dolls, because by god, does she need a drink today!

Dolls starts a little fire in front of his cabin and they share a bottle of Old Overholt rye, talking about nothing in particular. Nicole shares anecdotes of the more interesting cases she’s filed at the sheriff’s office; Dolls talks about the cattle drive they did last winter.

“What’s your real name, Cole?” Dolls suddenly asks. Nicole could have sworn they were both equally drunk at this point yet turning her neck left to look at him, Dolls looks sober as a judge.

She tries to think quick on her feet, convinced there must be another explanation for his inquiry than the only one she can think of that fills her alcohol-soaked cotton brain with alarm. Gawking at him for a good minute, blinking several times for a good measure, Nicole finally asks, “What do you mean?”

The man is still not looking at her, preferring to stare at the flames and poke the logs with a fire iron. After a long, agonizing pause, Dolls says, in that maddening, level voice of his that gives nothing away, “I’ve spent my whole life since I was 15 riding with cowboys. Many of them were like the other guys from my crew,” he finally looks at Nicole to convey some deeper meaning, which she is unfortunately not picking up, “…homosexual. Many of the guys were gay…”

Going back to his original thought, he continues, looking back at the fire, “But I’ve also encountered a few cowboys who did twice the work and complained half as much as the rest of the crew, always seemed to keep to themselves, and valued their privacy. There was something odd about these boys and they all shared some resemblance that I couldn’t put my finger on.”

He shrugs, “I learned later that they were women living a man’s life for a multitude of reasons. I know how to recognize the signs now, Cole,” he looks away from the fire and straight at Nicole, “and you check all the boxes.”

Avoiding Dolls’ eye, Nicole stares at the flames. Except for her run-in with Pearl earlier this year, caused entirely by her stupidity, she was never called out on being a woman before. She vaguely
thinks it must be the bourbon that makes her slip; she hardly ever imbibes but when she does, bad shit happens. Yet, Nicole cannot think of a single mistake she’s made in Dolls’ presence. Her breasts are tightly bound, a thick shirt covering her entire torso regardless of the weather; the voice she uses in public, much deeper than her real voice; her life journey a well-hidden gem that she never discloses to anyone – in fear of mis-gendering her younger self as much as preferring the relative safety of distancing herself from close relationships.

Nicole must have been ruminating for far too long, even for Dolls’ liking; he kicks her boot with his foot to gather her attention. She turns to look him in the eye and sees no use in lying; if he decides to take this information to the sheriff, she’ll just have to beg him to give her a head-start until the morning to pack her measly belongings and get the hell out of dodge.

“Nic…,” she clears her suddenly parched throat, “Nicole.”

Dolls’ face lights up with the largest, most genuine, toothy smile she’s ever seen on him. He gives her a cheeky, “Howdy, Nicole,” going as far as tipping an imaginary hat. Nicole can feel tears of relief, gratefulness, and joy fill her eyes, as she exhales deeply.

“Before we go on, though, I want to make sure I get this right,” Dolls’ expression turns serious and stoic again. “When I was in Texas, I worked alongside Johnny – a cowboy who explained to me that he felt a man, even though his body was that of a woman. God works in mysterious ways and I’m not here to judge his wisdom, yet that seemed like an unusually cruel punishment to trap someone in a body that didn’t belong to them,” he shakes his head.

Seeing where Dolls is going with his story, Nicole helps him out, “You want to know if I’m like your friend Johnny or like the women cowboys you’ve met.” After he nods at her thankfully, she responds, “I’m a woman, Dolls. I dress like a man because it gives me the agency over my life that frankly, I couldn’t have attained otherwise. I appreciate you checking, nonetheless…”

Nicole considers how to put her thoughts into words and how much more to disclose to this man who was a stranger to her not two months ago. Dolls is nothing if not patient as Nicole collects her thoughts, “I grew up among a Paiute tribe, where nádleeh – I’m not sure how to translate this… the one who transforms, maybe? – were people who embody both genders. They were well-respected within the hierarchy of the tribe… I never understood how strict the gender roles were within the Western society before I re-joined it as a young woman and it welcomed me like a punch to the gut.” They both laugh at that, some of the tension dissipating between them.

“You don’t mind, then?” Nicole asks, after the laughter dies down, seeking reassurance.

It’s Dolls’ turn to look at her owlishly, slowly blinking his eyes. Now that Nicole’s brain is not clouded by panic, she can clearly see that he is less than sober, although he hides it well.

“Do I mind that you are a woman, seeking an independence afforded only to a selected few in this land where supposedly all men are created equal?” He clarifies seriously yet something is his solemn tone makes her giggle. He grins back at her, pleased that apparently both of them considered that an excellent joke.

“I’m a black man, Nicole. We’re now how many years after the War for Southern Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation? Yet, here we are, with unlawful lynching of black folks on the rise and the so-called Jim Crow laws trying to permanently instill this concept of separate but equal into the shared American subconsciousness.”

Dolls is agitated now, or as agitated as he ever appears, yet he keeps his voice down almost to a whisper, checking their surroundings for unwelcome interlopers. “Do I mind that you figured out a
way to play them at their own game? A game that you’re so proficient at, you are apparently winning, if the star on your chest and a brand-new partnership deal on a land claim is anything to go by? No, Nicole. I’m a man enough to admit that I may be jealous of your ability to play them but I’d never resent you for it.”

“Thank you, Xavier,” chocked up, is all that Nicole can whisper back.

Waverly is in the process of sweeping the wooden floors of their cabin, when she hears horse’s hooves outside. Her father must have decided to come home for dinner tonight. She hurries off to the kitchen to set the pot of leftover stew on the fire, when she hears somebody else’s voice in the house, “You have a lovely house, Sheriff Earp.”

It sounds like Deputy Haught but could it be? The sun is already setting outside, indicating it must be about 8 o’clock this late in August. What could he be doing at the Earp homestead at this hour?

“Oh, I don’t care for any of the embellishments. It’s all my daughter’s doing,” she hears her father brush off the remark and she can clearly visualize the dismissive wave of his hand.

“Waverly! Ah, there you are.” Her father walks into the kitchen, Cole Haught in tow.

“Evening, Ms. Earp,” Cole says, adding, “I was just complimenting your father on how cozy and homely you cabin is, but apparently the praise should be directed at you.”

Waverly feels her entire face burn up – is she blushing? – and turns around with a quiet, “Thank you,” to straighten the utensils on the counter.

“Will you be staying for dinner, Deputy Haught?” Waverly asks over her shoulder, even though she only has enough rabbit stew left for her father; if need be, she thinks she can water it down a notch and cut thicker slices of bread to fill both men. The incredulous look Cole shoots her father is her first warning something is amiss.

Cole clears his throat awkwardly, and still looking at Wyatt, says, “I appreciate the offer, Ms. Earp, but… knowing I’d be coming to the homestead with your father tonight, I dined at Shorty’s.”

“No more of this nonsense in the future, you hear me, boy? After all, you being fed under my roof is the part of our agreement,” her father chastises Cole and adds to Waverly, “Mr. Haught and I formed a partnership to homestead together, so you better make sure the man is well taken care of around here.”

That’s a surprising development for Waverly, yet she quickly responds, “Yes father”, and goes back to stirring the stew. Wyatt sits down in one of the two chairs they have at the kitchen table. “Oh, and once you serve me dinner, go make sure the attic room is cleaned out for Mr. Haught, why don’t you?”

She looks at her father now who still pays her no heed, pointing at the second chair, “Sit down, son. If you’re not hungry, you can at least share a tea with me, while Waverly is moving her things.”

Halfway down to taking the seat, Cole shoots up, “Wait, is your bedchamber in the attic, Ms. Earp? I can’t possibly put you out!” and addressing her father, he adds, “I saw a little cabin on the side of the house, sir. I’d be happy to take that. I’m used to little to no comforts, I’ve got my bedrolls with me,
and…”

Before he can finish, Wyatt interrupts him, “Oh, don’t be ridiculous, boy. The cabin you’re talking about is naught more but a tool shed! Plus, the main house is the only place on the homestead with a functioning fireplace, and trust me when I say the winters here are long and ruthless.”

Cole looks like he’s ready to fight and die on this hill, and so Waverly chimes in, already seeing Wyatt’s short temper flaring, “Really, Deputy Haught, it’s no problem at all.” She places a bowl of stew in front of Wyatt and two cups of steaming hot tea on the table and scurries out the kitchen door and up the stairs to nip the brewing argument in the bud.

As she changes the sheets of her – of the – bed upstairs, leaving her duvet cover on the floor to fill it with her clothes for easier transportation down the stair, she’s trying to make sense of her feelings. She’s certainly upset with the unexpected development, mainly she thinks because the two men entered some sort of agreement that clearly has to do with her and the homestead, yet she was kept in the dark about it for who knows how long. Had her father informed her about it, she’d at least have more time to prepare the attic room for their guest instead of running around like a headless chicken. Waverly is a planner and unexpected situations of any nature simply don’t sit well with her… She’ll have to make sure she has enough eggs to make breakfast for everyone in the morning; if not, she’ll have to eat a toast with butter and acquire the necessary food stocks in town.

Still in her head, she jumps a little when Cole ambushes her at the bottom of the stairs, “My apologies for startling you – yet again – Ms. Earp. It’s very kind of you to relinquish your bedchamber for my benefit. May I at least help carry your belongings?”

Waverly looks down at the duvet cover she’s dragged down the stairs, lifting it up self-consciously, and starts for the drawing room, “You’re quite welcome, Mr. Haught.” Dropping the makeshift tote, she faces the man who walked a step behind her into the drawing room, “And if we are to live under the same roof, please call me Waverly.”

His smile is blinding, adorable (adorable?) dimples on display. “Then I insist that you call me Cole,” he extends his hand for a handshake. “Is there anything else I can bring down for you, Waverly?”

“Oh, uhm, I left all of my books upstairs. I’m currently reading only one of them and I hope it won’t be too much bother for you to have them stored in your room…” She looks down at the sitting sofa in their drawing room, already dreading having to sleep on it for the foreseeable future.

“But at all… Well then… Thank you again… Waverly. And I… um… I also wanted to apologize for putting you in this situation. Had I known that your father didn’t discuss our arrangement with you…” Cole nearly whispers the last part but Waverly cuts him off, “That’s not on you, Cole. My father has a way of … leaving me out of his plans.” She shrugs in reluctant acceptance, since what else is there to do.

Cole looks like he wants to say something else but he refrains, and adds with a nod, “Good night, Waverly”.

x

The week that follows is spent on getting used to new routines for all three residents of the
homestead. Unusual for him, her father spends every night of that week at home, talking with Cole at the kitchen table each night, long after dinner is done and Waverly is dismissed.

On one of those evenings, Waverly throws a scarf over her back, getting ready to go outside to chop and bring in more wood for tomorrow morning. She’s been using more fuel with Cole in the house, what with having to warm up twice as much water in the morning to fill everyone’s wash basins and having enough leftover firewood to cook breakfast.

“I chopped the wood, Waverly, and left it under the porch awning,” Cole says from his place at the kitchen table, a gentle smile painting his lips.

“It’s a woman’s job, son. You shouldn’t bother with it,” Wyatt grumps next to him.

Cole waves him off, “No bother at all, sir. I was building a third kitchen chair anyway, so a bit of an extra work with the wood seemed appropriate. In fact,” he looks at his damaged pocket watch, Waverly suspects more instinctively than to really check the time, “I should head back to the shed to finish that chair right now.”

He gets up before Wyatt can mutter another dissent. “Y’all have a good night.” And he’s gone, Waverly walking out the front door right behind him to discover a large stack of firewood – at least half a cord of it – neatly piled on one side of the porch. She shakes her head in a fond exasperation at the retreating form of the young deputy.

Two days later, just as Waverly and Cole are awkwardly sharing their first breakfast alone – an empty, newly assembled third chair indicating Wyatt’s absence – Waverly hears the noise of approaching horse hooves. Looking at Cole inquisitively, Waverly asks, “Are you expecting someone?” She’s about to get up and grab the sawed-off shotgun hanging on the kitchen wall – courtesy of Aunt Gus after the assault, since you can never be safe alone on a secluded homestead, miles from town – as Cole assuages her fear.

“Oh, yes. Yeah… I hope you don’t mind…” He scratches the back of his neck, a gesture Waverly learned to recognize as him being nervous or uncertain about something, “I built something for you out in the shed and I asked my friend Dolls to help me bring it inside today morning.”

Before Waverly gets a chance to ask more, there is a knock at the door and Cole is out of his chair and out the kitchen door to answer it in an anxious dash. The front door closes as quickly as it was opened and Waverly can only hear low murmurs of conversation outside, moving away from the main house and towards the shed. Curiosity piqued, she peeks from behind the sheer curtains of the kitchen window but the shed is not visible from this angle.

She walks into the drawing room – its open plan used to irritate her and she often asked her father to build an anteroom, yet now, as she peeps through the window, she’s glad for it. Just as she pulls the sheer curtains aside to get a better vantage point, the front door opens, and two men walk in, grunting, huffing and puffing, carrying something heavy.

“Tilt it to the right a bit, Dolls! No, my right, my right… Okay. You got it?”

Waverly is standing just a few steps from the door, yet engaged as they are, Cole and Dolls don’t spot her. The large object finally maneuvered through the narrow door frame, Waverly can now
discern it to be a bed. They set it down, Cole wiping the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve, while Dolls smiles at her, with a small, “Morning, Ms. Earp.”

At Dolls’ acknowledgement, Cole spins around, looking at Waverly sheepishly. Seeing her eyebrows shoot to her hairline in inquiry, Cole gets out, “We have two more things to bring in, Waverly. We’ll be right back. Hold tight.” He grabs Dolls by his shirt and drags him outside. Waverly is left standing alone in the drawing room, admiring the beautifully crafted yet unembellished four-poster bed.

The men come back, this time carrying a mattress and a weird contraption. “I better get going,” Dolls says quickly, slapping Cole on his shoulder.

“Thank you, Dolls. I owe you,” Cole responds with an easy smile on his face and a handshake for Dolls.

“Cole?” Waverly inquires, after Dolls shuts the door behind him.

“So, I umm… I felt dreadful for putting you out of your bedchamber. And then I noticed how you’d try to stretch your spine or rotate your shoulders inconspicuously throughout the day, and I figured that sitting sofa must be atrociously uncomfortable to sleep on. So… I built you a bed,” gesturing at the new piece of furniture, he’s rambling now, speaking quickly to get the words out. “The mattress is filled with hay for now, since that was the only material I could get a hold of on a short notice and I realize that it won’t be as comfortable as the bed upstairs but I will most certainly purchase half a bale of cotton on my next trip to the city, and once we – you, once you – get some geese and ducks, we can save the feathers and make the mattress even mo…”

Waverly stops the man’s ramble by putting a hand on his upper arm, “Thank you, Cole… This is… this is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.” Waverly’s eyes become misty; she’s never felt this overwhelmed by a positive emotion before and she’s not sure how to let it out.

Cole is still nervous, as he jumps a little at the contact. Looking down at his hands, he starts talking again, more quietly and calmly now, as if sharing a secret, “And I was also concerned about the lack of privacy that you must face every day in the drawing room, with Wyatt coming and going at all times of day and night… So, I built you this,” he unfolds the contraption – which to Waverly looked like a stack of wooden boards – and sets it up on the floor. She can see now that the six planks are attached together on hinges, zigzagging like a snake, and she’s slowly getting an idea of their purpose.

“It’s a privacy screen. I’ve seen one in Deadwood once – that one was beautiful though; the wood was all skillfully carved and painted. I guess this was my attempt at recreating its function without the aesthetic quality and the artwork.” There’s that nervous neck scratching again. “See, we can set it up in front of the bed and it will section it off,” Cole demonstrates in front of the sitting sofa, “and when you expect house guests, it can easily be folded and put away.”

“It’s very… thoughtful… of you, Cole,” still tearful, Waverly responds.

Seemingly trying to dissipate the awkward air between them, Cole claps his hands, “All right then! Where do you want your bed to be? I believe we have some redecorating to do!”

Chapter End Notes
War for Southern Independence:
The name used for the Civil War for many years afterwards, especially in the South.

Jim Crow laws:
Laws put in place after the Reconstruction that introduced racial segregation in the US. The name itself should indicate how heinous in design these laws were from the get-go, as Jim Crow was based on a caricature depiction of black peoples by a white man in blackface. Although the segregation "officially" ended with the 1960s social movement, the underlying principles are still very much present in action today, such as voter suppression, underfunding for school districts with majority black population, etc.

Men's dance:
Male homosexuality - although the term was not in use yet - was very common in the Old West, especially in places and professions that lacked the presence of women, such as cow herding or mining. I find it fascinating that we have this image of rugged macho cowboys, while the historical truth couldn't be further from it. There are several beautiful pictures surviving to this day from "boy dances", such as this one:
October, 18X4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October, 18X4

The days are getting cooler and Nicole’s pleased to have helped Waverly cover more sensitive plants in the garden, right on time to protect them from the first frost snap of the season. With the days losing light so quickly now, she’s abandoned her hope to finish the fence around the homestead this year, focusing on fixing the dilapidated roof of the barn, instead. She’s promised Waverly to build that long-awaited chicken coop for her but the barn must take priority; buying chickens in the Autumn will be close to impossible, while their horses will require warm quarters and dry hay to survive the upcoming winter. Nicole tries to work on the outside of the barn during daytime and moves indoors after dusk, working late into the night, with an aspiration to finish the barn and get a head-start on the coop.

Sitting at her desk at the sheriff’s station, Nicole flips through the gazette she obtains from Mrs. McCready whenever she’s in Purgatory. She’s officially on lunch break, drinking a lukewarm coffee, when a picture of a familiar face in the bottom corner of the 6th page draws her attention. The picture depicts a woman sitting on a jail cot, newspaper in hand; she’s wearing a black shirt, suspenders, and trousers. A man’s attire throws Nicole off but the picture clearly portrays no one else but Pearl Hart.

Nicole skims through the provided blurb quickly, gathering that Pearl was arrested after a stagecoach robbery in the Arizona Territory. That’s definitely a dark turn from the – mostly – innocuous cons Pearl and Joe used to run in Dodge City. The paper’s tone is definitely sensational, what with a female looter who was described as “just the opposite of what would be expected of a woman stage robber”. She reads on that Pearl was transferred to Florence, AZ, and banking on the media attention and lack of prison facilities for women, Nicole decides to make a quick trip down South before the trial.

Without delay Nicole tells Charlie she has an out-of-town family emergency and rushses through the door and across the road to Shorty’s. The saloon is nearly empty, with Wyatt Earp being one of three customers getting a drink this early in the afternoon. To Nicole’s disappointment, Waverly is not behind bar.

“Sheriff,” she greets Wyatt. “I have an unexpected family emergency down in the Arizona Territory that will require my absence from the office and the homestead for a couple of weeks.”

Nicole expects opposition or at least further questioning from the man and is already spinning out stories of an elderly aunt in her head, when Wyatt responds, “All right. Take a warm coat with you, son. The seasons will turn before you return.”

He’s looking at Nicole with a burning intensity that makes her briefly wonder whether he assumes her to be leaving Purgatory for good; after all, skipping town seems to have been Wyatt’s signature move.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll be back as quickly as the railroad travel allows,” Nicole tries to instill as much sincerity into her tone as possible. “Have you seen Waverly, sir?” she adds, looking around, hoping to explain her sudden departure to the girl.
“She went to Malta with Curtis. I swear this man puts the worst ideas in that girl’s head…” Wyatt grumbles.

Nicole tears a sheet of paper out of a little bound notebook she carries in her pocket and writes a quick note for Waverly. “Could you pass this on to Waverly? I’m afraid I have to depart immediately and won’t get a chance to see her.”

“Sure,” Wyatt responds, not very keen. Nicole has half the mind to find Mrs. McCready and explain the situation to her as well, in case the note doesn’t find its way to Waverly, but decides against it for the sake of saving time.

She passes the note to Wyatt and leaves Shorty’s, riding Nedley out of town towards the homestead to collect a few crucial supplies for her journey.

x

After two weeks of traveling on railroads and by horse, Nicole arrives in Florence, AZ, the night before Pearl’s trial is scheduled. She finds accommodations for the night and sleeps fitfully in an unfamiliar bed.

Entering the courthouse the following morning, Nicole is formulating a plan of how to free Pearl. The Pinal County Courthouse is a stately brick building; two-stories high, perfectly symmetrical, and with an ornate tower in the middle, it vaguely reminds Nicole of Moorish architecture she’s seen in a book about Spain.

Nicole didn’t want to abuse her stature as a lawman to defend Pearl, yet she decides to wear the deputy’s star over her shirt to give her words more gravitas should she be allowed to testify. She’s glad she’s arrived early, securing a front-row seat, as the small courtroom fills up to the brim.

Escorted by two guards, yet hands unbound, Pearl is walked into the courtroom. Multitude of flashes from box cameras light up the room, focusing entirely on the accused woman. Nicole was expecting to find Pearl demoralized and devastated, yet the woman is anything but; she’s donning a beautiful, obviously new, white skirt and a checkered tan blouse, and adorning her head is a fashionable, glamorous, large hat, decorated with flowers. The guardsmen allow her to converse with the press freely, straightening up, and puffing their chests proudly. Pearl talks with the reporters using the coquettish tone Nicole recognizes well from Dodge City, working her natural charm to her advantage.

Nicole is so enchanted by Pearl’s performance, she almost misses it when an agitated woman seated immediately to her right gets to her feet and reaches for a revolver on her hip.

“Would’ya look at that!” Pearl exclaims, throwing both her arms in the air, and walking briskly towards them, “My two favorite people in the whole world came all the way here to see me!” She crushes both of them in a hug, and whispers, with urgency, “What’ya doing, kid?! Put that gun away right this instance. Don’t you dare give them a reason and a satisfaction to get you killed. I have it under control.”

She turns to the guardsmen, now hovering anxiously right behind her, “A little fame and even your oldest friends come out of the woodwork, ain’t it right, gentlemen?” She finishes with an exaggerated wink. They chuckle, allowing her a few more moments. “Cole, hun, be a darlin’ and
...make sure my friend is escorted outside. The stuffiness of the room must be makin’ her faint,” Pearl addresses Nicole with some urgency – hitching a solitary brow in astonishment after noticing the deputy’s star – before being ushered to her seat, as the judge enters the courtroom.

Nicole is momentarily torn between fulfilling Pearl’s wishes and staying in the courtroom. Recognizing how perturbed and distressed the woman next to her is, however, Nicole decides to heed Pearl’s advice. Staging a gunfight in a tightly packed courtroom is the last thing that would help her friend right now.

She gently grabs the woman’s elbow and steers her through the crowd, just as the judge is reading the charges against Pearl, asking her for a statement. Pearl stands up, her back now to Nicole, and states in a strong, steady voice that certainly reaches every single person in the room, “I shall not consent to be tried under a law in which my sex had no voice in making”.

The courtroom erupts in a cacophony of yells, laughter, and scoffs, as the judge struggles to calm the situation down with his gavel. The woman next to her beams, her whole face transformed from an anxious scowl, while Nicole just chuckles. Pearl’s not wrong but damn if that statement will not make her case more difficult.

Once outside, the woman regains some of her mental faculties and yanks her arm away from Nicole. “Damn, I knew Pearl was crazy enough to eat the devil with horns on, but that was something else!” The woman’s piercing blue eyes burn with fire; her dark hair is long, loose, and curly; and to top it all, she wears man’s clothes and a low hanging gunbelt holding a Colt Peacemaker, with an air of arrogance and swagger.

“What’s your deal, Red? You a lawman?” She addresses Nicole, almost spitting out the last word with disgust.

Nicole reflexively detaches the star and hides it in her pants pocket, “No, uhm, I’m a deputy in a small town up North but it’s a temporary position. Pearl is a friend and I came down as soon as the news of her imprisonment reached me, to see if I could help get her out.”

The woman measures Nicole up with an unnerving calmness. Nicole’s not a type to give a hoot about strangers’ opinions about her, yet she inexplicably yearns for this woman’s approval. After an agonizingly long minute, the woman nods, extending her hand to Nicole, “You must be all right, if Pearl trusted you to walk me outside that room without putting a bullet in one of those shitheads. I’m Sally Skull.”

*That’s a fake name, if I ever heard one,* Nicole thinks to herself. “Cole Haught. Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Skull.”

The woman snorts, “Ha! Just call me Sally, won’t ya, Deputy Hot?”

Nicole nearly rolls her eyes at the woman’s antics. “Wait. You’re Sally Skull? Sally the horse thief, who drives the best horses in twice a year from beyond the Rio Grande?”

“Aren’t you a sweet-talker, Haught,” she deadpans. “It’s Sally the alleged horse thief to you and I prefer the term horse trader;” the banter and sarcastic one-liners seem to be Sally’s strong suit, as well as her armor. “Care for a drink, Red? I could murder for a tall glass of joy juice.”

Florence is a small town, smaller than Purgatory if that’s even possible, yet they easily locate a saloon on Main Street. Charles Rapp Saloon, as the simple signage above the awning indicates, is an unremarkable, almost quintessential Western saloon. One story high, long and wide only enough to fit a bar on one wall and a few tables against the other, the place feels instantly familiar to Nicole,
even though she’s never even been to the Arizona Territory.

They sit at the bar, as Sally orders, “Two cheap bourbons, straight.” They settle into a conversation fluidly; even though they are two very different people, unknowingly to Sally, they share a similar past. Sally talks about leaving home as a teenager; how the only thing she’s ever learned from her drunk of a father was how to steal horses; how she rode with the Banditos. She’s the more talkative one between the two of them, which suits Nicole just fine.

“Ya wouldn’t know, can’t possibly even imagine, how difficult it was to be a young girl trying to make a decent living, Red. There’s some fucked up stuff I had to do to get by,” she shakes her head despondently. “But hey! No one messes with Sally Skull, am I right?!?” And quick as a whip, the solemn mood is gone, replaced by an easy, if not a bit forced, smile.

“I have quite a few female friends making a name for themselves out West so I think I have a clue,” Nicole responds vaguely. Internally, she can’t help but think – not for the first time in quite a short few months – how comparably easy she’s had it living a man’s life for the past decade, how different her life could have turned out had she not made that decision somewhat unconsciously all those years ago, how she could have as easily ended up like Sally or Pearl… or Waverly…

“How did you come to know Pearl?” Nicole asks, trying to stop the runaway train of her thoughts.

“Buckle up, that’s one wild ride of a story! I was still a kid, so it must’ve been… I don’t know, nine, ten years ago? Anyway, there was this older buckaroo I was sort of seeing. He taught me to lasso and tame wild mustangs, in return requesting certain services from me. Young and stupid, I thought it to be an amazing, phenomenal deal. It was all going well for the first couple of months where I’d just help him… take the edge off, if you catch my drift, Red, but he’d never touched me,” Sally gets pensive again, clearly lost in an unpleasant memory. She gulps down her 4th bourbon of the evening, waving the barkeep for another one.

“Then, this one evening, the dude’s drunk and forces himself on me. I’m having none of it – right? – and being quick and slippery like a wet bunny, I run out the door.” She takes another large gulp. “But picture this, Red! The idiot follows me to the street and tries to forcefully carry me back to his room to finish what he’s started.”

Another swig and her tumbler is empty yet again. She shrugs, “I shot him… It’s not fucking easy to take a life even if it’s a dirtbag like him.” A few stray tears cut a pathway on Sally’s cheeks, like a river through a canyon, as she hastily dries them off with her sleeve. Nicole pretends not to notice, guessing the woman would not appreciate her compassion right now, concentrating on a half empty glass in her hand instead, as if it was the most interesting object in the universe.

“Did Pearl get you out of jail?” Nicole asks to bring the conversation back to her original question and spare the stranger some pain this story has obviously conjured up.

“Nah, even better. It was just pure happenstance Pearl and Joe were walking on the same street at this same time. They were the only witnesses there and they stuck around when the sheriff arrived. Pearl’s testimony saved me from prison, as the sheriff’s report from that night stated that I were understood and justifiable, having acted in self-defense. Pearl took me in and I traveled with them for the following year. The best fucking year of my life! So yeah, there you have it. She was… you know, she was the only one who gave a damn about me, Red, and I’ll never forget that.”

“She’ll be okay. Pearl, I mean,” Nicole says, sensing that the sour mood of her drinking partner is not only caused by the painful memories but also by the overwhelming feeling of helplessness and incapacity to break Pearl free.
“You think?” God, she sounds so small!

This badass, strong, arrogant woman is so broken in this moment that Nicole instills all the assurance she can muster, “They’ll put her away for 20 years for that stunt but I bet she’ll be out within a year. They have no female prisons and no sheriff department nor a prison warden in their right mind will want to deal with the shitstorm that is Pearl Hart.”

That earns her a chuckle, a raised glass, and a toothy, “Here’s to that!”

The homestead feels lonesome, with Wyatt staying in Purgatory proper more often than usual and Cole being gone for the past two weeks. Waverly sits at the kitchen table, sipping warm tea, and looking at two empty chairs in front of her. It’s not like she doesn’t have anything to do. Certainly, with the winter fast approaching, her outdoor tasks are quite limited, what with all the fruits picked from the orchard and most of the vegetables harvested. Nonetheless, the cooler weather also brings about the pickling and preserving season, which Waverly has a proof for in a form of countless jars of pickled cucumbers in brine, sauerkraut, and a variety of pumpkins, onions, beets, bell peppers, et cetera, preserved in vinegar. Fruit processing is next on her list, including an assortment of jams, preserves, sauces, and compotes, as well as a plan to smoke dry strings of sliced apples and pears by the fireplace.

With all the tasks still needed completing before the worst hard freeze arrives, destroying the fruits stored in the cool pantry shed, Waverly keeps busy. Consequently, she doesn’t entirely understand where the sudden loneliness is coming from; sure, her father used to make an effort of at least dining with her three or four times a week but she was used to the long, solitary days spent on the homestead. She suspects it has something to do with one gallant deputy, a thought that – in and of itself – causes her to blush.

With Cole in the house certain housekeeping tasks that Waverly dreaded the most, like chopping firewood or bringing buckets of water in, were taken of her hands. Waverly affectionately remembers one morning a few weeks ago when she was outside right before daybreak to draw buckets of water out of the well – as she always does (did) first thing in the morning, bundled up in three layers of sweaters and a coat – when Cole followed her outside. He was confounded and sputtered in indignation, explaining he always assumed the fresh warm water in a basin outside his bedchambers came courtesy of Wyatt, that he would never expect her to do this for him, and especially not in this weather! Waverly didn’t as much mind the physical aspects of drawing the water and carrying the buckets inside – after all, they had a proper pulley installed on their well – as she disliked the northern chill and dew permeating into her very bones that early in the morning, regardless of the season. Thus, she relinquished the responsibility to Cole without much objection.

The little memory brings a soft smile to Waverly’s lips, glued to the warm ceramics of her teacup. Cole has so many attributes that draw and attract Waverly in a way Champ never did. He is so considerate, so respectful and chivalrous towards her but he’s also kind and carrying towards the residents of Purgatory, who’ve already learned to come for help to the young deputy instead of her father, the sheriff. He’s certainly physically attractive as well, taller and slimer than Champ, but obviously concealing respectable muscles under all the layers he seems to prefer to wear. And his smile? God, those dimples do things to Waverly she cannot explain.

Once she started noticing Cole’s appeal, Waverly was concerned she developed feelings for him out of some warped sense of obligation and thankfulness after Pike’s futilely attempted assault. Truth be
told, she’s still worried about it, especially with Cole not showing any outwardly signs of being interested in her outside of sharing a homestead and maybe being friends.

She wishes she had someone to talk about this with, talk about her confusing feelings for Cole, talk about the fast approaching train of loneliness and fresh abandonment caused by Wyatt’s current string of absence. The only friend she really has in Purgatory is Chrissy, one of the Jones’s girls, but Chrissy shares everything with her older sister, Stephanie, who’s a major gossipmonger. The last thing Waverly needs is for this to get back to Cole and trigger the sense of responsibility in him beyond what he undoubtfully already feels towards her and the homestead.

No, she can’t talk with Chrissy. Resigned, Waverly decides to attempt to have an awkward conversation with Aunt Gus instead.

x

An opportunity presents itself two weeks later, after Waverly rides to town with Uncle Curtis in the morning to help at Shorty’s and join the McCreadys for dinner afterwards. Waverly’s almost done washing the dishes from the evening rush at Shorty’s, when Aunt Gus asks from her desk in the corner of the backroom, “How are the winter preparations coming along at the homestead, dear? Had Mr. Haught finished fixing the barn before he disappeared?”

It’s a perfect opening and Waverly swallows nervously, trying to get a hold of her anxiety, before biting the bullet, “He’s almost done, yes. I think there were some details he still wanted to finish inside but… Wait, you think he disappeared?”

“My sweet girl… How else can you refer to a man who walks out of his post in the middle of the day and rides off into the sunset, with little more than a shirt on his back?” Aunt Gus responds, with something akin to pity in her voice.

Waverly hasn’t even considered that possibility. Cole wouldn’t leave the homestead, wouldn’t leave her, like everybody else, would he?

“No, that’s not… he’s not…” Waverly tries to collect her thoughts; taking a deep breath she says, “My father told me Cole had family emergency he needed to attend to in Arizona. You know rail travel takes weeks and it’s a long journey…” The excuse sounds weak even in her head.

“You’re an adult now, Waverly, and you need to stop being naïve and start seeing through lies people like your father – and now apparently also Cole Haught – spin. You know best that the disappearing act is Wyatt’s preferred solution to nearly any problem – how many times did he move town, you in tow?” In the past six months or so, Aunt Gus has visibly stopped coddling her; the signature Gus McCready tough love approach – that Waverly only remembers seeing her use as a small child on her older sister, Wynonna – is by all accounts introducing itself to Waverly tonight.

Drying her hands on a kitchen rag, Waverly sits down on a crate next to Gus’s desk. She hasn’t thought about it… doesn’t want to think about it on top of every other shitty problem in her head. Eyes closed, she rubs her forehead, trying to curtail the imminent headache and focus her thoughts enough to carry this conversation forward.

“Aunt Gus, there was something else I wanted to talk to you about, pertaining to Cole. I am… I’m fond of him. And I guess I just need to talk it out loud with somebody, make sure I’m not projecting
some other feelings onto him. God, I don’t even know if the thing’s reciprocated! He’s just so courteous and kind to people that it’s very difficult to make the distinction,” Waverly rambles, jumping from one thought to the next, now that the floodgates have opened.

Aunt Gus seems sincerely surprised, “Slow down, Waverly… I had no idea you were developing feelings for Mr. Haught… Are you sure it’s not just an exaggerated feeling of gratefulness? He did prevent Pike from harming you any further, after all.”

“That’s what I was worried about as well, you know? But there had been days when we would work alongside on the homestead and it would be just so easy to be around him; we tend to work in unison, like… I don’t know… like the words are not needed because our minds think alike and our bodies move together seamlessly. That probably doesn’t even make sense…” At her aunts encouraging smile, Waverly continues, “At those times, I never thought

Oh, gee, thank god for this man and all he’s done for me, you know? I didn’t even think about the assault or my father or anything else… It just seemed like we belonged together in those moments, performing the most mundane tasks, like harvesting potatoes.”

Aunt Gus takes her hand, “Oh dear… What I think is that you need to talk to Mr. Haught about this, if he comes back. But allow me to give you one piece of advice – do not rush things. Your mama fell for Wyatt hard and fast and that relationship destroyed her. You are still so young, Waverly. You recently broke things off with Champ Hardy, survived an attempted assault, and had a new person move into the homestead. That’s plenty difficult to process, without the added pressure of starting a new relationship.”

Waverly responds through grateful tears, “Thank you, Aunt Gus.” She adds in a whisper after a beat, “Do you think Cole Haught would be a good match for me?”

Taking a long minute to consider the question, Aunt Gus looks Waverly in the eyes, “Mr. Haught is an upstanding and kind man – that much I am sure of. He sure swept this entire town of their feet! From the improvements he’s managed on the homestead and his work as the deputy, I can tell he’s dedicated, sensible, and level-headed. On top of that, he doesn’t seem interested in booze and women. These are all good qualities to look for in a man, Waverly… But all that being said, even before he left without a word, there was something about him that rubbed me the wrong way. Call it an intuition or a gut feeling… but he seems like a man harboring a secret and I’ve known plenty of those in my life.”

That’s a lot to think about, yet Waverly appreciates her aunt’s candid honesty, nodding her head thoughtfully. She likes to think that this would be the kind of a relationship she’d have with her mother, had she stuck around to see Waverly grow up into the woman she is today.

“Let’s go have that dinner, Aunt Gus,” Waverly offers with a small smile.

x

“Look what the cat dragged in!” Wyatt announces cheerfully, storming through the McCreadys townhouse door, and into their dining room, where Gus and Waverly are setting up the table. Pulled by his coat’s sleeve, Cole Haught stumbles into the room behind Wyatt, his Stetson politely held in his hand.

“Mrs. McCready, Waverly,” he greets them. “My apologizes for coming unannounced. I’ve just
arrived back in Purgatory and Sheriff Earp insisted we pay you a visit, while Nedley is being watered and fed.” He looks tired and worn out, yet his genuine smile at seeing both women is apparent. Waverly also notes how much longer his red hair has gotten over the weeks he’s been gone, even though his face looks freshly shaven, as usual. Wyatt just makes himself at home, taking a seat at the dining table, without as much as a perfunctory greeting.

“Good to see you made the journey back but you have some explaining to do, young man. Us Gibson women do not take kindly to men leaving without a word,” Aunt Gus responds but her harsh words are muffled by a sincere smile.

“Oh, I… uhm… I left a note. For Waverly,” Cole stumbles over his words, anxiously rotating the Stetson in his hands. Addressing Waverly directly, he adds, “When I learned I needed to be in Arizona, I left you a note, Waverly. It must have not made it to you…” He frowns in thought at Wyatt’s back.

Waverly makes the connection immediately – because of course it had something to do with her father – and assuages Cole’s anxiety, “No matter now, Cole. We’re all glad to have you back. Please, join us for dinner?”

“Oh, no. I wouldn’t want to impose,” he responds, already taking a step back.

Aunt Gus will have none of this though, “Nonsense. Take a seat, Mr. Haught. You look tired as a worn-out shoe.” She gently maneuvers him towards the table. “I trust your trip was successful?”

Seated down and looking fully surprised to have been so easily shepherded in, Cole replies, “Unfortunately, it wasn’t entirely successful but I am glad I went. A close family friend was in trouble, and though I failed to be of use to her in a manner I wished I could have been, I think I supported her in other ways.”

The answer is polite but Waverly can’t help but notice how simultaneously vague it is. Catching her aunt’s eye, it seems both women are thinking back to their earlier conversation.

“Tell me, son, is Arizona as warm this time of year as they claim? This constant chill is slowly getting on my nerves and the idea of being permanently content with the weather is becoming more appealing in my old age,” Wyatt interrupts their conversation, clasping Cole’s shoulder, and laughing at the reference to his old age.

Waverly has noted her father’s odd choice to refer to Cole as son from the get-go but seeing them both together in this moment – Wyatt with a beaming smile under his ludicrously trimmed mustache, happy to the extent she hasn’t seen in weeks – she experiences a painful punch to her stomach, realizing that Cole is the perfect son Wyatt never had but always wanted. She mumbles a quiet, “I’ll finish getting the meal ready,” and scurries out of the room, convinced that nobody was paying her any heed anyway.

She collects herself in the kitchen; today has definitely brought her plenty to think about, she just needs to make it through this dinner and find the headspace to sort, categorize, organize, and file away her thoughts. Aunt Gus joins her in the kitchen just as Waverly is about done with stirring the lima beans and pours them into bowls, letting her aunt deal with the roast beef.

They serve the food. Wyatt and Cole, now joined at the table by Uncle Curtis, discuss horse traders from beyond the Rio Grande. From what Waverly can gather, her father is arguing that they’re all horse thieves, while Cole is trying to make him see the economic and cultural benefits the trade with Mexico brings to the Western Territories.
Curtis looks uneasy with the exchange and as soon as everyone is seated, he changes the topic, “I forgot to mention this earlier, Waverly, but you were right – as usual. I climbed into our attic today and – sure enough – that collection of the Navajo grinding stones we’ve been looking for was right there!”

“Are you interested in the Native American culture, Mr. McCready?” Cole asks politely.

“Oh, Waverly hasn’t told you yet? I’ve been collecting Native American artifacts for the better part of the past decade with the intention of displaying it all one day. Waverly has been helping catalog everything – my wife keeps the dining and drawing rooms free of those items but I swear to god that every other corner of this house is filled with boxes full of treasures,” Uncle Curtis laughs jovially, while Aunt Gus shakes her head in an overexaggerated exasperation.

Cole looks, dare she think, impressed? “Wow, Waverly. That’s incredible. How did you learn to distinguish the origin of the artifacts? There are so many distinct nations, especially out here in the West, it must be difficult to catalog at times!”

Blushing, both at being praised for something she herself takes a great deal of pride in and having all the attention on her, Waverly, quietly says, “At first, I learned from the Plains nations, when father and I were relocating between the territories quite frequently. Since we’ve arrived in the Montana Territory, I’ve been trying to read up on Southwestern nations and tribes, as well as acquiring knowledge and advice from the local Nez Perce, Shoshone, and Blackfoot peoples.”

“This silly hobby of yours is surely getting out of control,” her father chastises, not too pleased. Addressing Cole, he adds, “Let me tell you, son, had this girl spent half the time on needlework as she does on reading, she would have already been married off to a fitting suitor!”

Waverly burns with indignation and humiliation; looking pointedly down at her plate, she blinks the tears away, not willing to be any more embarrassed tonight. She can sense Uncle Curtis swallow his food quickly and pat his lips with a napkin, getting ready to step in. Another fight between the two men is the last thing Waverly wants tonight.

She’s surprised to hear another voice speak up, “All due respect, sir, there is nothing wrong with women pursuing education or a career. Modern women have proven they can fulfill their household duties, while realizing their other dreams. There is nothing more attractive than a smart woman, Mr. Earp.”

The last sentence seems to have slipped through Cole’s lips unbidden and without his permission; he blinks rapidly, averting his eyes from Waverly, a handsome blush spreading down his neck.

Waverly half expects her father’s short temper to flare up any second; after all, disagreeing with him in general and presenting dissenting opinions on Waverly specifically, antagonize the man like nothing else in the world.

“Ha! The youth always find a way to turn a conversation onto less appropriate planes!” He slaps his hand against his lap in a display of utter entertainment. “Don’t know how you connect a lady’s brains with her appeal, son, yet I am certain that line works wonders on women, ain’t it?!”

To his credit, Cole looks bewildered, while Aunt Gus and Uncle Curtis look on with distaste. Her father rises, readying to leave, “Well, wasn’t this a nice family dinner! I better get going – have some urgent policing work to complete tonight still.” With a nod of his head, he exits the room, “Curtis, Gus. I’ll see you at the office tomorrow morning, Cole.”

The momentarily silence at the table is deafening. As Aunt Gus gets up to collect the empty dishes,
Cole seeks Waverly’s eyes, “I am so, so sorry, Waverly. That was an ill-considered thing of me to say…”

Waverly can’t say that she understands why the man is apologizing for standing up for her; in fact, she was quite flattered by his words, never before hearing a man referring to a woman’s intellect as something appealing. She gives him a little smile across the table that she hopes will be enough to soothe his nerves.

Uncle Curtis comes to her rescue, “Are you interested in Native American culture as well, Mr. Haught?”

“I’m not sure that interested is the right term for me… I know a little bit about the Southern Paiutes and the neighboring tribes from when I was younger.”

Aunt Gus walks back into the dining room with a dessert tray. “And how did you come to that knowledge, Mr. Haught?”

While Cole is typically reticent to share information about his past life, tonight he divulges freely, his walls lowered from the long, arduous journey. “I was taken in by a Southern Paiute tribe as a child after… after my family was killed in the Mountain Meadows massacre.” The memory seems painful, causing Cole to look down at his lap.

He quickly recovers and offers Waverly a small smile, “I have a bit of an understanding of the Southern Paiute culture and I still speak their language – if you ever need any help with your research, Waverly, I’d be happy to assist however I can.”

_Or maybe he’s lowered his walls on purpose after father’s insensitive comments to make me feel more confident and secure_, Waverly thinks to herself.

“I’d love th… I’d like that,” she responds. “Wait, you mentioned you know the Paiutes’ language? Sometimes I uh… I hear you talk and scream at night sometimes… The walls are thin at the homestead…” _Where is she going with this?!_ Cole just admitted to having lost his family in a gruesome way and his nightly outbursts must obviously be nightmare-related.

He simply nods at her, expression more somber but still earnest and encouraging for her to continue. With her father gone, Waverly feels freer to participate in the conversation, “You sometimes use words that sound as if you’re talking about… ears and bison? Or at least they sound very similar to those Northern Paiute words I’m familiar with…”

To her relief, Cole is not offended by the question that could easily have been interpreted as impertinent and intrusive. He chuckles a little and shakes his head with fondness, “Kuttsu Nakka? I see why you’d be concerned for my sanity, Waverly. That’s a name – Bison’s Ear. It’s someone important to me; a great man, a teacher, and the closest I had to a father figure.”

The atmosphere at the table relaxes after that exchange. Curtis asks Cole a few general things about his experience with the tribe, clearly not wanting to pressure the man. Cole, in turn, engages Waverly in conversations about Native American symbolism and embroidery. He is so attentive and supportive, she doesn’t notice when her one sentence responses turn into long rambling soliloquies, surprising herself by not feeling embarrassed or self-conscious. Uncle Curtis adds his few cents whenever he gets a chance. Their conversation continues considerably later than is strictly appropriate.

Chapter End Notes
Sally Skull was a nickname of Sarah Jane Newman who was better at shooting guns and taming horses than most men in Texas. A skillful horse-trader, she had five husbands - many of whom are believed to have been killed by her hand.

Pearl Hart was really tried for an unsuccessful stage coach robbery, where she defiantly stated in court, “I shall not consent to be tried under a law in which my sex had no voice in making”. What a badass! Her trial and later imprisonment gathered significant media attention - so much so that she got the largest cell in prison with a private yard, where she was allowed to entertain reporters and photographers. Pearl was sentenced to 5 years in an all-male facility (female prisons didn't exist at the time) but was pardoned and released 2 years later. It is unclear why the pardon came but the rumor has it she got pregnant in prison and the Governor of Arizona did not want to deal with the scandal; still, many say Pearl herself planted the rumor of her pregnancy as a way to get released - there are no records of her giving birth after her release. Here's a picture of Pearl in jail right before the trial:
November, 18X4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November, 18X4

It’s the last day of November, Saint Andrew’s Day. Waverly, already in her nightgown, brushes her
hair by candlelight, in preparation for the night. Her thoughts drift to Cole. In the past month or so,
since Cole’s return from the Arizona Territory and that memorable dinner at the McCreadys, they’ve
forged something akin to friendship with an undercurrent of a shy attraction.

Cole is still as chivalrous and respectful as ever, yet Waverly can now see the way he looks at her as
if she hung the moon and the stars, how he blushes handsomely when their fingers
*accidentally* brush when she hands him a teacup in the evening, how he abides by her every wish
and whim. Waverly knows she’s exploiting Cole’s affection for her at times – god, does she *know!* –
but it feels so good, so warm, so gratifying to be the center of someone’s attention for once in her
life.

She also thinks she should feel guilty for stringing him along and not having that one all-important
conversation about what they mean or *could* mean to one another in the future. Waverly’s only point
of reference is her past relationship with Champ – Champ who guilt tripped her into becoming
intimate very early on. So yes, she thinks she *should* feel guilty, yet to his credit, Cole doesn’t seem
to be in a hurry to urge what’s blossoming between them any faster. In fact, he seems perfectly
happy to simply be in Waverly’s presence – maddeningly so at times, when Waverly herself
becomes impatient and wishes he finally made a bold move!

But no, she’s decided to follow Aunt Gus’s advice and take things slowly, get to know Cole and his
secrets. Advice that she’s beginning to abhor on cold lonely evenings like tonight, after the sun sets
shortly after 4 pm and temperatures outside hardly ever rise above freezing.

Waverly’s gone as far as riding to Malta with Uncle Curtis one day and visiting the local clockmaker,
where she found the perfect pocket watch for Cole. Remembering how his old watch got damaged in
his fight with Pike and seeing how he still to this day keeps it in his vest pocket and looks at it as if it
was still telling time, Waverly decided it was the most suitable Christmas gift she could give him.
The watch is neatly wrapped and waiting for the occasion in her bedside drawer.

Mere minutes after Waverly blows out the candle and settles comfortably underneath a pile of duvets
and blankets, the front door lock rattles and her father stumbles in. In moments like this, she’s
immensely grateful for the screen Cole built to grant her some privacy in the drawing room. She
thinks that Wyatt is *actually* trying this time to keep quiet but he still takes long five minutes to undo
his bootlaces and lose his heavy coat, stumbled around not six feet from her bed, and quietly
mumbling under his mustache.

She hopes he just staggers into his bedchamber, as is his custom when he arrives at the homestead
after everyone has already retired for the night. She’s not so lucky; Wyatt makes a ruckus in the
kitchen, looking through cupboards and still mumbling incomprehensibly. Assuming he’s looking for
food, Waverly decides to get up and fix him something quick after counting to 60 in her head.

Just as she unwraps herself from the warmth of her bed, her father yells, abandoning all attempts at
keeping quiet, “Found the firewater! Cole, son, come downstairs and have a drink with the old
man!”
Based on the frantic steps she can hear in the attic, Cole is already up and presumably putting on his shirts. Waverly retreats back behind the screen and underneath the blankets, seeking any heat still trapped within. Maybe she’s a cop-out for leaving Cole to deal with her belligerent father but the thought of facing and – more than likely – angering Wyatt in this state settles any uncertainty she feels about staying out of the kitchen. She’ll have to make Cole an extra strong coffee and a few more strips of bacon in the morning as a thank you.

Quiet steps and a hushed, “Sheriff Earp, sir,” announces Cole’s arrival downstairs. Waverly can barely hear him. She knows she ought to just turn around and let the men talk but the curiosity gets the better of her as she’s straining her ears to eavesdrop the best she can.

“Sit and share this bottle with me. I have urgent matters to discuss with you,” her father announces, his voice not as booming as before but not a whisper either.

“Of course, sir,” Waverly hears Cole respond in a quiet tone, clearly hinting for Wyatt to keep it low as well.

Her father, however, has no qualms about keeping the normal volume to his voice, “My dear friend Doc is gravely ill. So much so, in fact, that I’m afraid he won’t make it until New Years.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir. Is there anything I can do? For him or… or for you?” Cole – sympathetic and compassionate as ever – offers. Waverly can hear the clink of glassware and uncorking of the bottle.

“I’ll be frank with you, son. Doc is the only friend I’ve had on this earth since I was a young man. I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my days, some of them came back to haunt me. I… I lost my firstborn daughter – Willa – my sweet, brave Willa… She was shot in a crossfire when the men I stole horses from broke into our family cabin back in Iowa one night… My wife left me the following morning, leaving the other two girls in my custody.”

Both men remain quiet for a minute, Cole seemingly giving Wyatt the time and space to talk. Waverly has never heard the whole story of what had happened that night; she was but a toddler when it happened and her memories of the events are convoluted. Waverly’s older sister, Wynonna, has always blamed their father for Willa’s death and mama’s disappearance, yet Waverly could never bring herself to trust that.

“I’ve made a lot more mistakes following that night; you have to see that I was a broken man, just trying to stay on the surface, and I know a lot of my actions deeply influenced and hurt both Waverly and Wynonna. Doc was the first person who broke through to me, setting me straight, and believing in the man I could be.” There is a pained sigh from Wyatt and more clinking.

“The truth is, Doc is the only person keeping me in this hellhole. Purgatory – what a fitting name! The minute he dies, I’ll be out of here. But this time, I don’t want to take Waverly with me. You’d be doing me a great favor, son, if you agree to marry her and take her off my hands.”

“Sir? Waverly is… she’s her own person and she should decide who she wants to spend her life with… I am not… I’m not sure I’m the best suited person for that job…” Cole sputters. If Waverly was saddened by her father’s harsh words, she is even more surprised and disheartened by Cole’s rejection.

“What sort of nonsense is this, son? I see how you look at that girl – do not lie to me!” Waverly hears a harsh sound of a hand slapping the table. After a beat, Wyatt adds more calmly, “Waverly is not even my daughter. I accepted her as my own, as one of Michelle’s conditions to stay with me. See what good that brought about…”
Waverly cannot believe her own ears. Wyatt is not her father? Wyatt, who has been around as long as she remembers; Wyatt, who – for better or worse – was the only person that has stayed with her throughout her life; Wyatt, who taught her how to read when she was six years old and taught her to swim when she was eleven? And now, apparently, he’s had enough of her; he’s planning on leaving her behind, whether or not Cole agrees to marry her.

What will she do? She loves the homestead but as a woman, she can’t own the deed in her own name. Maybe the McCreadys will take her in… She’s certain they would but does she want to be a burden to somebody – yet again?

The tears invade her eyes uninvited and her whole body is racked by sobs. She turns away from the hallway, putting a pillow over her head to muffle her whimpering and prevent being heard by either man.

“Sir… You’ve been a father to Waverly, no matter the circumstances. You abandoning her may just crush her…” Nicole tries to reason with Wyatt. The man is undeniably drunk yet she doesn’t doubt for one second that his plan to leave Purgatory is sincere.

She’s trying to think of something, anything, to change his mind. This will break Waverly’s heart, she’s sure of it. To make matters worse, she’s been a coward for the past several months and still hasn’t disclosed to Waverly that she’s not a man. That will so not go over well if she’s forced to propose to Waverly.

Wyatt’s offer to take Waverly’s hand in marriage comes unexpected to her. Sure, Nicole has quickly fallen for Waverly – who wouldn’t? – but she thinks… no, she knows her feelings are not reciprocated nor could they ever be. Waverly is smart and beautiful and oh so driven; she’ll make it far in life, while Nicole and her humble dream of homesteading would only keep her back.

“Listen, Cole… I may just be the worst thing that has ever happened to that girl… I was a drunk, a horse thief, a muscle at my brother’s brothel… I dragged her from state to state, from one territory to the next. Because of me, Waverly has never experienced stability in her entire goddamned life!” Wyatt sighs and rubs his mustache, “I love her like my own flesh, Cole, do not doubt that for one second. For once in her life I’m just trying to do what’s best for her. When I first thought about riding South, Waverly was coming with me in my plans. But then you showed up and swept this tiny town and my daughter off their feet… You’re a good man, Cole; you’ll be the best husband I could have ever wished for, for any of my daughters. God knows you’re more respectful and kinder to Waverly than I have ever been to any woman in my life. Waverly is not going to ride with me to Arizona not because I don’t want her there but because her life is here, in Purgatory, where she has the McCreadys, the homestead, and you, son.”

Nicole is stunted into silence, processing Wyatt’s reasoning. He’s not wrong that Waverly will be happier in Purgatory; still, this doesn’t mean Nicole should marry her.

After one last swig of his bourbon – what was this, his third, fourth tumbler? – Wyatt adds thoughtfully, “If I could, I’d transfer the land deed into her name but as an unmarried woman, she cannot own property. I plan on signing the homestead off into your name, Cole, before I depart Purgatory. If you are the honorable man you claim to be, you will marry my daughter, protect her, love her, and allow her to experience the tranquil stability of staying on this land.”
Wyatt gets up suddenly, stumbling over his feet towards his bedroom, arms stretched out, seeking support from any stable surface in his way. Clearly, her answer did not matter in this moment. *God damn it,* but did this man have a way of forcing her hand!

After staying alone at the kitchen table for several long minutes, Nicole dejectedly climbs the stairs up to her room, thoughts racing. She can’t think of a single way out of this conundrum. They can’t wed, for obvious reasons. Nicole can’t leave town, as this would cause Waverly to lose the homestead. They cannot as well just continue to cohabit the house without Wyatt’s presence acting as a chaperone, as superficial as it might have been – the puritan morality of Purgatory’s residents would turn both of them into pariahs, town’s sweetheart and favorite deputy or not.

Mind made up, Nicole sees only one solution – *woman* up and talk to Waverly. She knows this will be a tall and delicate task, what with having to break the news of Wyatt’s impending departure, his plans for their marriage, Waverly’s true parentage, and to top it off, Nicole’s real sex and gender.

When Nicole ventured downstairs the next morning, feeling like a nervous ball of yarn, both Wyatt and Waverly were already gone. She made the trek to the barn through knee-deep snow to discover Wyatt’s horse as well as the cart Waverly typically rides into town on, gone.

Now, coming back to the homestead after a day of working – albeit distractedly – at the sheriff’s office, Nicole is standing nervously on the house porch, giving herself one last pep talk. She can see a light illuminating the snow on the side of the house from the kitchen window – a telltale of Waverly being home. Wyatt’s horse was not in the barn upon her arrival, indicating they will be dining alone tonight. With one last deep breath, she unlocks the front door and walks in.

As Nicole enters the kitchen and greets Waverly, the girl doesn’t even spare her a glance, focused intensely on something she’s stirring on the stove. Nicole sits down at the table, scratching nervously at a little dent in the table’s wooden surface.

“So, uhm… Waverly… There’s something I need to talk to you about. A few things, actually.”

Waverly freezes her movements but doesn’t turn away from the stove to look at Nicole. When she speaks, her words are so quiet Nicole physically angles her body closer to hear, “No need, Cole. I heard your conversation with my… with Wyatt last night.”

“Oookay,” Nicole swallows nervously, “so… you’ve heard he wants us to… to marry?” She pats herself on the back for getting the words out without a hitch or an unnecessary ramble. This is going better than she expected.

Waverly sighs and drops her head in defeat, “Look Cole, after last night, I really don’t expect you to go through with it. Who would want to marry me – a bastard child, abandoned by my own mother, left with a man who wants nothing more to do with me?” Nicole sees Waverly hastily wiping her eyes, before quietly adding, “I know I am worthless, Cole, and I don’t want you to marry me out of pity or some skewed sense of responsibility and loyalty to Wyatt.”

*What?*

“Waverly, stop. Where is this coming from?” Nicole is up and out of her chair in an instance; she hovers right behind Waverly, yearning to offer comfort yet terrified of crossing lines, especially with
the rest of the topics she wanted to talk over tonight.

“Please, don’t do this. I heard your rejection last night.” Waverly’s crying openly now, yet still not looking at Nicole.

“God! Rejection? Waverly, any person would be lucky to have you. I would be lucky to have you! Yet, knowing you don’t share my feelings, I… I guess I didn’t want Wyatt to force you into a situation like this. Finding a positive outcome out of this mess is what I wanted to talk to you about… Tell me what you want, Waverly, what will make you happy, and I will do everything in my power to do so.” Now she’s rambling and has definitely crossed some lines but the sight of Waverly crying over a pot of beans simply breaks her heart.

Waverly turns around, eyes red but no new tears coming, an adorable frown adorning her forehead, “You… you have feelings for me?”

All Nicole can do is look into those big eyes, filled with vulnerability and tears, and nod dumbly.

Waverly’s eyes round comically, she sniffles and giggles – honest to god, giggles, “We’re both so useless then… I have feelings for you too, Cole… Have had for a long time now…” Waverly admits shyly.

What?

“What?” This is so not where Nicole imagined this conversation going a mere half an hour ago.

The bashful smile on Waverly’s face is the only warning Nicole gets before the girl takes a step forward, closing the distance between them, and throws her arms around Nicole’s neck. She thinks distractedly that Waverly must be standing on tiptoes, as their lips meet.

Waverly’s lips are soft yet demanding, supple yet relentless. Nicole knows her mind must be exaggerating this moment since she has missed intimacy in the past half a year, yet she swears that feeling Waverly’s mouth on hers feels like the most sensual experience of her entire life.

The force with which Waverly attacks her mouth throws both of them backwards, until Nicole finds purchase in the nearest chair, Waverly falling onto her lap. She smiles into the kiss, elevating Nicole to a never-before discovered plane of exhilaration, because she’s done this! She made this beautiful girl smile when her world was crumbling down around her.

The reasonable part of her brain breaks through to Nicole eventually. What is she doing? They still haven’t talked about one important aspect of Nicole’s identity that might change how Waverly feels about her… or about Cole, rather.

Nicole had no idea Waverly felt this way; had she known, this conversation would have happened earlier… much earlier. Did she lead Waverly on, using her disguise to let Waverly fall for her? She doesn’t think she did… Did she? Nicole’s head is spinning, partially because of an angel in her lap but partially also because the panic and disgust with herself are setting in.

Nicole breaks the kiss and stands up abruptly, almost dropping Waverly to the floor.

“Cole, what is it? What’s wrong?” Waverly’s anxious timbre of voice is familiar to Nicole from many dinners spent listening to her treading lightly around Wyatt.

Ashamed and needing to collect her scattered thoughts before continuing this conversation, Nicole mumbles an apology and scurries off upstairs to her room, hating herself for not being strong enough to stay with Waverly in this moment and explain everything once and for all.
After a sleepless night, Nicole is ready to face both, the day and the music. After the initial shock of Waverly’s confession passed, she had the time to really examine and reflect on her past actions towards the girl. Today, in the dull sunlight of a new day, Nicole knows for certain that she did nothing to mislead Waverly, simply because she was thoroughly and unconditionally oblivious to her developing feelings.

This does not negate the fact that Waverly fell for Cole under false pretenses; Nicole fully realizes how hurtful this may turn out for Waverly and how much she will be to blame for it. Nevertheless, there is a sense of serenity within her; come what may, she knows she will do everything in her power to make Waverly happy and find a way for her to keep the homestead, even if it means that Nicole has to eventually depart from Purgatory – and from Waverly’s life – for good.

She’s sitting on her bed, both feet on the ground, lost in thought, slowly unbuttoning the union suit she always sleeps in. With one arm out, half of Nicole’s unwrapped torso exposed, someone barges into her room.

“Surprise, babygirl!” A woman yells but seeing Nicole, she immediately draws her revolver.

Quick on her feet, Nicole rolls over to the other edge of the bed and hides behind it. She tries to button herself up but her fingers are shaking uncontrollably. Nobody, not Waverly, not even Wyatt, has ever entered her room when she was at the homestead.

“Who are you and where is my sister,” the stranger demands, nearly growling.

Nicole peaks over the bed but seeing the gun barrel pointed at her, quickly ducks down again. “I don’t know who you’re looking for, ma’am, yet I am certain there must be some misunde…”

Before Nicole gets a chance to finish, her bedroom door is kicked in again, “Drop the gun, you… you… inconsiderate donut!”

Nicole chances a peek again to see a glorious sight of Waverly, still in her white nightgown, pointing the sawn-off shotgun at the stranger’s back. Could she be any more adorable?

Nicole watches the stranger lower her Colt, put both her hands in the air, and turn around with a soft, “Waverly?”

“Wynonna?” Waverly answers, apprehensive and uncertain.

“Hey sis… You grew out your… hair,” the stranger – apparently Waverly’s long-lost sister, Wynonna – finishes lamely. Waverly lowers the shotgun a touch but doesn’t put the safety back on.

Pointing behind her back, both hands still tentatively in the air, Wynonna asks, “Who’s that?”

“He’s partnering with fath… with Wyatt on the homestead,” Waverly’s choice of words is missed by her sister.

“He?” Wynonna inquires, clearly referring to Nicole’s sex, yet it is Waverly’s turn to be oblivious.

“Yes, he is. And it’s something you’d have known had you not disappeared on us for… god, it’s
been over a decade, Wynonna!” Waverly’s eyes well up with tears, not the first time in the past 24 hours. “Let’s go downstairs and give Cole some privacy to get decent,” Waverly is averting her eyes, either bashfully or in embarrassment after last night, Nicole can’t tell.

When the sisters leave her room, the calmness Nicole felt all morning disappears in a puff of prairie dust, replaced instead with an immense sense of dread. She was finally ready to share her secret with Waverly and now a complete stranger may take that opportunity away from her.

Chapter End Notes

And I don't even have any fun historical facts to soften the blow... How rude of me!
Nicole wraps her chest up in a blur; she’s done it so many times before, it comes as natural and absentminded to her as tying shoelaces. Pants, an undershirt, a cotton button-up shirt, and a warm flannel follow up. She doesn’t even bother to put on her boots, grabbing them from next to her bedroom door and rushing downstairs.

Her thoughts race with different scenarios. *I’m so sorry Waverly.* That’s not good enough. *I never meant to mislead you.* Knowingly or not, you did. *I care about you.* Does that even matter?

Entering the kitchen, Nicole first sees Waverly leaning against the counter by the stove, her arms defiantly crossed over her chest; she sends Nicole a small smile that floods her with relief because *she’s not too late.* Next, she notices the stranger – Waverly’s sister – sat in Wyatt’s kitchen table chair, her back to the door and to Nicole.

“So, yeah, that pretty much sums up the events of the past few years, Wynonna. There are some other, more… recent developments that I don’t want to get into right now,” Nicole hears the tail end of what she assumes was Waverly’s abridged – and most likely censored – version of the past several months. How do you even describe the events of your entire life to a virtual stranger, who abandoned you as a child, yet is now gleefully sat in your kitchen; especially if your life has been as eventful as Waverly Earp’s?

“Wynonna, I want you to meet Cole Haught. Cole, this is my sister, Wynonna.”

Introductions made, the stranger turns around in the chair to look at Nicole. Piercing blue eyes meet Nicole’s and she can’t shake the feeling she’s met this woman before.

“Red?” Comes from Waverly’s sister.

The realization strikes Nicole like a lightning, “Sally?”

“Sally?” Waverly repeats, visibly confused and uncomfortable.

Wynonna dismisses her sister, “Just an alias I go by sometimes, babygirl.” She turns back to Nicole and burst out laughing, “Oh, this is gold! I had no idea, you sneaky bastard!” She makes a show of drying the corner of her eye with amusement and pats her hand on her lap, in a gesture so similar to Wyatt’s it’s uncanny, “That’s why Pearl trusted you! It all makes so much more sense to me now, Red!”

Still standing in the kitchen doorway, Nicole is dumbfounded. How is it possible that out of all the millions of people inhabiting the vast expanses of the Western United States, she was walked on by a woman who she’s met by pure coincidence in the Arizona Territory a mere few months ago? A woman who also happens to be Waverly’s sister? And who also chose this particular morning to reunited with her family in a tiny god-forsaken town a thousand miles away from Arizona?

Waverly is clearly not amused by the display of familiarity between the two people in her kitchen, who by all accounts should be naught more but strangers, “You two better start explaining things to me right this minute! How do you know Cole, Wynonna?” She demands, nearly stomping her foot.
Waverly’s voice is enough to bring Nicole out of her stupor, “Sally – ugh, Wynonna – please let me explain this to your sister. Believe it or not, I was actually on my way to have this conversation with Waverly when you walked in on me this morning.”

A smile still on her face, yet the hand on the kitchen table inching closer to her Colt Peacemaker in an explicitly threatening gesture, Wynonna responds, “Hobble your mouth, Red. I’ve got this.”

Turning back to Waverly, she continues, “So Cole and I met a few months back in the Arizona Territory, where a mutual friend of ours – Pearl – was put on trial. I wanted to bust her free but Cole here heeded Pearl’s request to keep me in check and his reason prevailed.”

The way she’s emphasizing Nicole’s adopted name each time brings a cold sweat to her forehead.

Wynonna continues, unperturbed by the rising tension in the kitchen, “It didn’t make any sense that Pearl trusted this guy so explicitly. You see, Waves, Pearl is a raging feminist and doesn’t trust a single man in her life, including her beau, Joe. But now it all makes fucking sense since I discovered this morning entering the attic r…”

Nicole feels faint, leaning against the door frame for support, as someone enters through the main door, derailing Wynonna’s train of thought.

“Waverly, dear?” comes Mrs. McCready’s voice from the drawing room.

“In the kitchen, Aunt Gus!” Waverly’s voice is as sweet as ever, yet her face is clearly showing annoyance at the interruption.

Mrs. McCready’s countenance is as stern as it is concerned, as she passes Nicole to walk into the kitchen, with a cursory, “Mr. Haught.”

“Wy… Wynonna? Child, what are you doing here?” Shocked, Mrs. McCready addresses the niece she hasn’t seen in years.

“Hi, Aunt Gus,” is all Wynonna offers, apparently not eager to explain her sudden re-appearance to her family.

“Don’t think you’re off the hook, young lady! I’ll come back to you later.” Mrs. McCready turns to Waverly, “Now, I come with dreadful news, dear. I just received a letter from your father and came as soon as I could. Doc Holliday died last night of that awful lung disease and your father says in his letter he couldn’t stay here with Doc’s ghost on every corner. He’s left Purgatory this morning.”

“Why is everything happening so goddamned fast,” Waverly mutters, eyes closed, fingers gently rubbing her temples.

“I’m sorry to be the one to break this news to you, my dear, but Wyatt also transferred the deed to the homestead into Mr. Haught’s name. In his letter, he claims that they have already discussed this… arrangement…and that you, Waverly…you are to marry Mr. Haught,” Mrs. McCready continues, clearly uncomfortable with the turn of events.

“Like hell they’re getting married!” leaping out of her chair, Wynonna yells.

“Wynonna! What is the meaning of this?” Mrs. McCready demands, just as Waverly snaps, “Why the hell not, Wynonna!”
“Why not? Why not?!” Wynonna fumes, clearly losing temper just as easily as Wyatt, “Because Cole, here, is a woman and I won’t let my baby sister get tricked into some deviant relationship!”

The silence that follows Wynonna’s words is so absolute Nicole swears she can hear the snowflakes hitting the ground outside. “Waverly,” she tries weakly but doesn’t even know where to start.

To her credit, Waverly doesn’t break, doesn’t cry. She stands there, eyes searching Nicole’s face. Voice strong, unwavering, all she asks is, “Is this true?”

Forcing her treacherous eyes to rise from looking down at her feet in shame, look Waverly in the eye, and face the betrayal, heartbreak, and anguish she caused, Nicole says, “I’m so sorry, Waverly… Please, let me explain…”

But Waverly has had enough, as she storms out the kitchen, shaking her head in disbelief. Nicole hears the front door open and slam closed angrily. She looks out the kitchen window at the snow falling steadily and all she can think of is that Waverly will be cold outside.

Wynonna stomps indignantly, jabs her index finger at Nicole’s sternum, and growls out, “If you as much as look at my baby sister the wrong way, I will ensure you won’t be able to look at anything ever again. I’m back home now and I’ll find a way to fix our father’s mistakes, one way or another!” She storms off, presumably to find and console Waverly.

Mrs. McCready clumsily slides down a chair, with a heavy sigh, “Oh my… I knew there was something peculiar about you, Deputy Haught, yet I could never put my finger on it…” She doesn’t sound mad or upset, and Nicole doesn’t miss how she used a gender-neutral salutation with her name.

Seeing Mrs. McCready be more forthcoming and open to a conversation, Nicole tries to explain herself, “Mrs. McCready, if you’d just allow me…” but she gets silenced by a dismissive wave of the woman’s hand.

“My first responsibility is to my niece… both of my nieces, in fact. I will make sure they have the space and the time to process everything properly. For now… I believe it will be in everybody’s best interest… if you didn’t stay on the homestead… I understand that as the lawful owner of these premises… you may feel entitled to staying… but…” Mrs. McCready soldiers on.

“Oh no. It won’t be a problem, Mrs. McCready,” Nicole is fast to assure her. “I’ll head for Purgatory right away and will sleep at the sheriff’s office as long as need be. I just hope… I hope that Waverly finds it in her heart to speak with me eventually and let me explain…”

“Thank you,” Mrs. McCready sounds genuinely grateful, as if she truly believed that Nicole would have insisted on staying and causing more disturbance. “Although, you staying at the sheriff’s office won’t be necessary. When you arrive in town, please find Curtis. He’ll see you into the room upstairs of Shorty’s.”

Nicole nods in appreciation, heavy steps already taking her out the kitchen. Mrs. McCready walks her towards the front door and adds, “Expect a visit from me within a day or two, Deputy Haught. It would appear you have a lot of explaining to do.”
Waverly has been staying at the homestead for the past two weeks, ruminating under a heap of warm blankets, and being taken care of by Aunt Gus, while Wynonna made awkward attempts at cheering her up. Her older sister moved into their – her – father’s old bedchamber without a second thought. Though she’s had all the time in the world, curled up in bed day in and day out, Waverly couldn’t find a headspace to discuss her parentage with Wynonna quite yet.

Wyatt’s departure certainly stung, yet she doesn’t feel the all-encompassing, cataclysmic sense of abandonment she thought she would. The letter he left for Aunt Gus justified and perhaps even exonerated Wyatt’s decision to leave Purgatory without her. Truth be told, Waverly is relieved she was not asked to move away from Purgatory, from the homestead, and from the McCreadys. She’s come to think of this place as home and leaving it behind would have been devastating.

Cole has been staying in the upstairs room at Shorty’s and hasn’t made any attempts at contacting her, although Aunt Gus claims he – she – is simply waiting for Waverly to be ready to talk. Waverly’s really trying not to overdramatize the situation, yet she doesn’t think she’ll ever be ready to leave the homestead again not to mention to face Cole.

Waverly has so many contradicting, jumbled feelings, she can’t sort them out; she feels embarrassed for being deceived by Cole’s disguise; she feels humiliated by it being discovered by her only family left; above all, she feels heartbroken, because the man she fell for does not exist. God must have a very cruel sense of humor for introducing Cole – brave, courteous, attentive, supportive, and hard-working Cole – into her life only to fail to disclose that she’s a woman.

She’s not naïve enough not to have realized by now that some people prefer same-sex partners, like Jeremy and Robin – the Jones’s ranch hands. They never harm anyone by their relationships and Waverly never thought of them any less for it. It’s just that she isn’t like that.

Pondering and contemplating in vicious circles from the safety of her bed, Waverly hears a horse approaching the homestead. Judging by the fairly bright light outside, it must be about noon and the guest is probably just Aunt Gus paying her a daily visit with a meal to warm up on the stove. Wynonna is still asleep in her new bedchamber down the hall from the drawing room and she may or may not get up to see Aunt Gus. She has taken up a permanent residence both at Shorty’s and at the boardinghouse, quickly befriending town’s various residents and riff-raff to boot. Wynonna’s booming friendship with Xavier Dolls, one of Cole’s close confidants, initially filled Waverly with a delicious sense of karma, yet even that didn’t last long. Nobody deserves to spend their lives alone, without people they can trust – not even Cole – and Waverly now hopes Xavier will find a healthy equilibrium between being both Cole’s and Wynonna’s friend.

The front door unlocks and opens, letting a gust of freezing cold air in, and causing Waverly to burrow deeper into her blankets, now only the tip of her head poking out from underneath. She hears muffled sounds of someone taking their outerwear off followed by the sensation of her mattress dipping down under somebody’s weight.

“Waverly, dear, I brought some soup and cornbread. Join me in the kitchen?” Having not received any verbal acknowledgment, Aunt Gus sighs, pats the indistinct heap of blankets, and leaves the drawing room.

Deciding that 10 minutes was probably enough sulking and not wishing to push her luck with Aunt Gus, Waverly gets up, wrapping one of the blankets around herself, and – following the heavenly scent – she trudges down the hall to the kitchen.

“Ah, there you are, honey. I brought some fresh coffee beans with me as well. Here, try some of this – I swear it’s strong enough to bring your granny Gibson back from the dead,” Aunt Gus has been
trying for humor and levity the past few days and Waverly can’t say it’s not working, as a rare smile
crosses her face.

As they sit and share cups of coffee and bowls of hot soup, Aunt Gus looks at Waverly cautiously,
“Cole asked me to retrieve some of her items from the attic. I must say I felt quite witless for not
realizing sooner than a person might need more than one shirt and a pair of pants, which is all she’s
left the homestead with.”


“She also asked me… she asked for you to move back to your bedroom upstairs, Waverly.”

“What?” Waverly is stunted, “Why? Is Cole not coming back? She can’t just abandon the
homestead!” She can’t abandon me.

“Dear girl… Cole is not giving up on the homestead… at least not yet. The two of you need to sit
down like adults and have a conversation about everything that has transpired and how to move
forward. I know this is all overwhelming. But it’s also a second chance, Waverly. You know my
stance on the matter and I hope you will sort your thoughts soon enough to talk with Cole.”

Aunt Gus’s stance on the matter is yet another issue confounding Waverly. Why does it feel like
nobody is on her side in this? Well, maybe except for Wynonna who in all sincerity offered to run
Cole out of Purgatory by any means necessary.

“How are you so calm about this, Aunt Gus? You are the one who told me to be careful with Cole,
that he… that she was hiding something, and you were completely right.”

They’ve had this precise conversation multiple times already, yet Aunt Gus’s resolute voice doesn’t
reveal any impatience, “Waverly, Cole is the same person she was when she walked into Shorty’s
that day when Pike tried to assault you. She’s still the same person who fixed the barn, built the fence
around the homestead, and started on the irrigation ditches for next Spring. She’s still…”

Waverly knows all of that, what she cannot comprehend is how will this help mend her broken heart,
“Maybe so, but that doesn’t negate the fact that she lied to me and let me… God, Aunt Gus, I
fell for Cole. He was a perfect man, a perfect partner. How am I supposed to welcome this person back into
my life?”

They have never gotten to this point in their previous conversations and Aunt Gus can clearly sense
her vulnerability and anguish. She treads carefully but – in a true Aunt Gus fashion – does not
sugarcoat things either, “What she did was certainly wrong and you can be assured that Cole realizes
that as much as you do… But, dear girl, speaking with her over the past couple of weeks I’ve come
to realize that she truly did not suspect your developing feelings…”

Waverly ponders over Aunt Gus’s words. It makes her feel marginally better not having been
deceived purposefully, yet the outcome for her remains unaltered. Wasn’t the road to hell paved with
good intentions, after all?

“But this is not about Cole, Waverly,” Aunt Gus continues. “You’ve been doing what others want
you to do for so long. Now you can live your life. Cole will do anything to help you keep the
homestead, if you want it. Just talk to her.”

As Aunt Gus is cleaning up after their luncheon, Waverly thinks that she may have a point. Dare she
think there might be a silver lining in this situation? For the first time in weeks, Waverly thinks of
Cole not as an early hard freeze that destroyed her blooming garden but rather as a first beam of the
spring sunlight, warming the soil and the seeds hidden within.

Standing by the kitchen door, ready to head back to town, Aunt Gus adds, “Lest I forget, I’ve invited Cole to join us for the Christmas Eve supper. Didn’t seem fair to have the young deputy spend it alone. I trust you and your sister can behave.”

Apparently, Waverly will have to face Cole sooner rather than later, whether she’s ready or not. She looks suspiciously at her aunt, wondering if the invitation was extended to Cole solely owning to the goodness of Gus’s heart.

x

A week later has Waverly buzzing with anxiety; she’s as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. She runs from the McCready’s kitchen to the dining room, and back again, making sure everything is set for the perfect Christmas Eve feast.

Aunt Gus assured her that she needn’t worry about speaking to Cole tonight, if she’s not ready. Yet, worry she does, as she feels increasingly ridiculous, adjusting plates on the table and fluffing the throw pillows on the sitting sofa.

Wynonna teased her initially for being so anxious but quickly quieted after getting an earful from Aunt Gus. As an apology, she ensured Waverly that Cole would certainly appear any minute after the sunset, since she learned from Dolls – who has been recently deputized – that he was on duty tonight alongside another deputy. Cole simply wouldn’t have enough to do at work to stall for too long.

Nevertheless, here they were, all getting antsy, their stomachs rumbling, as the sun has already set two hours ago, yet there was still no sign of Cole. Waverly is beginning to think that Cole will miss the dinner after all and all her planning and fidgeting will be for naught. Aunt Gus must share a similar sentiment, although the disappointment is more visible on her countenance, as she invites her family to join her at the table.

Just as everybody is seated and Aunt Gus starts passing the mashed potatoes around, there is a quiet knock at the door. Waverly jumps up a little, but it is Uncle Curtis who goes to unlock the door and let their last guest of the evening in.

“I apologize for my tardiness, Mr. and Mrs. McCready. I was held up at the sheriff’s office.” The lie is evident in Cole’s voice and it earns her an exaggerated eye-roll from Wynonna.

“No apologies needed, Deputy Haught. Please join us, we were just about to dig in,” Uncle Curtis clasps Cole on her shoulder.

Cole takes a seat next to Aunt Gus and does everything in her power to avoid Waverly’s eyes. That gives Waverly more confidence, as she takes a few long minutes to study her, while Aunt Gus and Uncle Curtis talk about one thing or another.

Cole looks even more worn out than the day she arrived in Purgatory, heavy bags under her eyes indicating a lack of sleep Waverly hasn’t even seen during the peak harvest time when they both worked tirelessly at the homestead from dawn till well after dusk. Her shirt, though clean, looks rumpled; Waverly always prided herself on pressing all of Cole’s and Wyatt’s clothes and she faintly wonders how uncomfortable it must be to live out of a small room upstairs of Shorty’s. She cannot
decipher the unfamiliar way Cole carries herself with tonight; that attractive self-confidence and warmth are gone, replaced instead with something akin to embarrassment? repentance? self-deprecation? Waverly is not sure what, since Cole won’t lift her sight off the plate and Waverly always thought that her eyes were the most expressive part of her face.

A question directed at Cole by her uncle brings Waverly out of her examination, “Oh my! I just realized that we’ve all simply assumed that your name really is Cole but it must be something else, isn’t it?”

Quiet up to this point, Cole seems a bit rattled at being addressed, “Yes, sir. Cole Haught was… it was my father’s name.”

“What’s your given name, dear?” Aunt Gus inquires, not unkindly, more with a thoughtful curiosity and a healthy dose of encouragement.

“It’s… it’s Nicole, ma’am,” She rubs her neck in a nervous tic.

“Well, Nicole, we are glad you made it to dinner tonight,” Uncle Curtis concludes with enthusiasm that feels a bit forced to Waverly.

“And feel free to drop the fake voice around us too. I hope you realize that no matter what happened you can trust everyone at this table and count on us for support,” her aunt adds with more conviction, causing Wynonna to mumble something similar to, “like hell she can,” under her breath.

Cole – Nicole – clears her throat, and her voice comes out at least half an octave higher but with as much of the pleasant lilt to it, “Thank you, ma’am.”

The dinner continues awkwardly and visibly uncomfortably for Nicole. Both Waverly’s aunt and uncle try to engage Nicole in a conversation about her work and her new intermediate duties before the town’s assembly finds a new sheriff. Nicole’s answers, though still polite, are constrained and succinct; she doesn’t elaborate much on anything and the flow of the conversation stutters and suffers for it. Waverly is glad the attention is not directed at her but the longer the dinner continues, the worse she feels for Nicole.

Not an hour has passed since they’ve sat down at the table, when everyone is happily satiated. Aunt Gus gets up to collect everybody’s plates and bring out the dessert, when Nicole rises as well, “Mr. and Mrs. McCready, I truly appreciate your kindness tonight but I’m afraid I must bid you a good night now. The dinner was positively delectable, Mrs. McCready.”

With a short polite nod to everyone at the table, Nicole scurries for the hallway. Aunt Gus sends Waverly a suggestive gaze, but as her niece stubbornly refuses to read the subtext, she’s obligated to put her thoughts into words, “Waverly, dear, please see Nicole out, as your uncle and I clean up the table?”

“Yes, Aunt Gus,” Waverly responds with a hint of petulance.

Already at the door, Nicole is briskly putting her heavy coat back on. She appears to notice something in her coat’s pocket and pulls a thin package, wrapped in a brown paper, out. Eyes fixated on the gift in her hands, still not looking at Waverly, she says, “I got this for you after the last time we had dinner with the McCreadys. It would be a waste for me to keep it so…” She shrugs, “I hope that even with everything that transpired between us you will still accept it.”

Nicole extends the gift in her hand, which Waverly cautiously accepts, her mind rushing to a little box wrapped in a similar brown paper, hiding a handsome pocket watch, left forgotten in her bedside
drawer.

“Thank you… Nicole,” Waverly responds earnestly, causing Nicole’s eyes to shoot up and meet hers for the first time that night. The connection lasts but a few seconds before Nicole nods and turns on her heel to leave in a haste.

Momentarily stunted and worried by the pain she saw in Nicole’s eyes, Waverly stands frozen in the spot, staring at the door closed behind the other woman. Eventually, she looks down at the package in her hands and unwraps it carefully. From its rectangular shape and the overall feel, Waverly can tell that it is some sort of a book. What she finds under the brown wrapping paper, instantaneously brings tears into her eyes.

The book’s cover reads: “Southern Paiute, a Shoshonean Language, by Edward Sapir.”

Wynonna clearing her throat directly behind her, entirely tactless and inappropriate, has Waverly drying her eyes surreptitiously. “You know, sis, Dolls told me she never even uses her real voice around him.”

Waverly turns around to look at her sister in an obvious request to continue her thought. All she gets though is a mere shrug of Wynonna’s shoulders and a weak, “Just saying…”

Chapter End Notes

Southern Paiute is only one of hundreds of Native American languages that was nearly eradicated in the USA - it's estimated that about 300 separate languages were spoken in North America (excluding Mexico) in the pre-Columbian era. Today, there are only about 1,400 native Southern Paiute speakers.

The book by Edward Sapir is real although it wasn't published until early 1900s.
January, 18X5

Chapter Notes

My wife insists on reading this fic, even though she hasn't watched the show (yet). Last week, she randomly decided to record a reaction video to reading Chapter 8. Enjoy?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

January, 18X5

New Year’s Day, 18X5, welcomes Waverly with an unusually sunny morning and surprisingly chirpy calls of chickadees. Feeling as energized as the birds outside, Waverly is washed, dressed, and running down the stairs from her newly reclaimed attic bedroom, skipping two steps at a time. She’s a woman with a plan and nothing will stop her today, not even a sight of a disheveled Wynonna walking through the door after a long – and clearly eventful – night of commemorating the arrival of a new year.

“Why you grinning like a weasel in a chicken coop, Waves?”

“I’ll have you know, I’m riding with Aunt Gus to Purgatory this morning to talk with Nicole.”

“Ha! What a great day you picked!” Prompted by Waverly’s confused expression, Wynonna elaborates, “Red was singlehandedly keeping the lubricated sots from burning Purgatory down in celebration last night. I saw her release Pete from the drunk tank no longer than two hours ago, so maybe mellow down on the cheerfulness and bring a gallon of a barefooted coffee with you? I’m gonna go sleep it off!”

Before Waverly can ask any more questions, Wynonna disappears in her bedroom.

Waverly paces at the bottom of the stairs at Shorty’s. She’s decided to give Nicole more time to sleep but not an hour later has her regretting that decision, as the anxiety sets in, replacing the serenity she felt all morning. Mind made up, she briskly walks up the stairs and knocks softly on Nicole’s door. She has to repeat the motion several times, knuckles rapping with increased intensity each time, before the door unlocks, revealing Nicole’s sleepy face. The door is barely ajar and only Nicole’s head pokes through the gap at an angle that reminds Waverly of a confused puppy.

“Waverly?”

“Nicole! Hi… May I come in?” Waverly asks, already making a step forward, not leaving Nicole a chance to respond. Waverly makes it all the way inside, when Nicole – still standing by the open door, clearly slower on the uptake this morning – responds, “Sure, come right in.”

Door closed, Nicole turns around to look at Waverly, “I would offer you something to drink but…”
she vaguely spreads her palms indicating the lack of facilities in the room. “Would you like to take a

seat?”

“Oh no, I have a lot to talk to you about and I think better when I pace. But… uhm… why don’t you

sit down? You look like you had a long night.” This is going great thus far; they’re both being civil,

Waverly hasn’t started rambling yet, and Nicole is not avoiding her eyes today.

“You have no idea,” comes Nicole’s response, as she sits down in one of the two chairs in the little

nook and rubs her face.

In this moment, Waverly realizes that Nicole is not wearing anything but the union suit that she must

obviously use as sleepwear. She’s never seen Nicole in anything less than layers upon layers of shirts

and the sight temporarily derails Waverly’s train of thought. Nicole’s body is lean but the slight

definition of muscles is clearly apparent underneath the thin fabric. The curves of her breasts and hips

leave Waverly flabbergasted – how has she not recognized a clearly feminine shape of Nicole’s body

before?

“How do you hide… you know…?” with a flimsy wave of her hand around her own torso, Waverly

is ready to facepalm herself in exasperation, because evidently her brain-to-mouth communication has

no filter today.

Nicole’s eyebrows shoot to her hairline, yet her response is more teasing than offended, “Is this what

you came to discuss with me, Waverly? The method I use to conceal my breasts?”

Burning bright red in embarrassment, the heat spreading like a prairie fire from the tips of her ears to

below her collarbones, Waverly sputters, “No! No, I uhm… I’m not. I mean, I’m sorry. That was

inappropriate…”

“It’s okay to have questions, Waverly, and I’ll answer all of them honestly when the time comes, but

it would appear we have more pressing issues to address, wouldn’t you agree?”

Thank god for Nicole pulling her out of the 6-foot hole she dug for herself. “Yes. Absolutely. This –

us and the homestead – is what I need… what we need to talk about. Not your… not the other stuff.”

With a warm, encouraging smile, accompanied by a small, “I’m all ears,” Nicole yields the control of

the conversation to Waverly.

Looking into Nicole’s face – so much more tired and gaunt than it even was at Christmas Eve, yet

simultaneously more open and receptive – Waverly reins her racing thoughts in and, pacing back and

forth in the small space of the room, she begins, “The homestead is the only notion of home I have

and I will do nearly anything to save it. With Wyatt gone, I realize I will need

a lot of help not to let it all fall to pieces.”

After another deep breath and looking Nicole right in the eye, Waverly delivers the one sentence

she’s practiced in her head since Christmas Day, “I’m ready to put the past behind us and I want you

to uphold the deal you’ve made with Wyatt and partner with me on the deed.”

Holding her breath in anticipation, she observes the furrow of Nicole’s forehead. “Waverly, I uhm…

Even though I didn’t intend to, I misled and hurt you… Why would you want to partner with

someone like me on the deed, someone you don’t know you can trust? Why not just turn me in and

find another willing partner?”

Nicole’s words are self-deprecating, yet her voice is strong and full of conviction. Aunt Gus was

right – even Waverly herself suspected this much after the Christmas Eve dinner – Nicole has
punished herself sufficiently for the unfortunate turn of events.

“You see, I thought about that… You did, Nicole…” Her voice wavers, “You did hurt me. Nevertheless, I do understand now that your actions were not deliberate. And I strongly believe in second chances.”

There is a spark of something too similar to hope in Nicole’s eyes for Waverly’s liking. “Plus… there is the legality of the whole thing – with you officially holding the land deed in your name. As an unmarried woman, in the eye of the law, I cannot own real estate. You should also know best that seeking potential partner for homesteading is a tall task in these parts. I don’t wish to start the whole process all over again with a complete stranger.” After a shrug, she adds, “Better the devil you know.” The last part – needlessly cruel and not entirely sincere – has Waverly flinching internally.

That spark in Nicole’s eyes extinguished, she nods solemnly, “Okay... How do you plan on explaining our arrangement to the townsfolk? They won’t look too kindly to two unmarried people of the – presumably – opposite sex living together.”

“We won’t have to explain it. We’ll simply get married,” Waverly tries for nonchalance yet it comes out shaky and with a rising intonation to it, as if she was asking a question, instead of making a statement.

Even though her mouth now hangs open in a little O, that goddamned spark of hope is back in Nicole’s eyes, “Waverly… I’m not sure that’s the… It wouldn’t be fair… I wouldn’t expect…” Nicole’s thoughts refuse to materialize in any coherent form.

Realizing belatedly that her proposal may have been received as more than a business arrangement she intended it to be, gets Waverly unreasonably irked, “Don’t get any ideas about this… It will be nothing more but a mutually beneficial agreement between two friends. We will appear a happy couple to the prying eyes, sure, but if either one of us finds a romantic partner, we’ll annul the marriage and dissolve our deal… We’ll keep separate bedrooms… I want to make this much clear…” Is she rambling? She is, isn’t she?

“God, Waverly, I would never ask you to be someone you’re not,” visibly taken aback and affronted, Nicole responds heatedly. After a beat, she adds in a whisper, “I’ll give you all I have to give, Waverly. Whatever you want.”

Waverly stops pacing and looks at Nicole; she’s still irrationally irritated yet now she can’t shake the concurrent feeling of admiration for Nicole’s courage and conviction in the face of so many obstacles. “I just screamed at you. You shouldn’t be nice to me.”

Nicole gives her a weak, forced smile, and Waverly is not oblivious enough not to notice how much of a toll this conversation has had on the already dirt-tired woman.

“Come back to the homestead? We’ll figure everything else out, just… come back?” Waverly offers, hoping not to have already broken the tentative peace between them.

Nicole gazes into her eyes for an excruciating long moment, searching her face for what? – Waverly doesn’t know – but she must find it, and responds with, “Okay, Waverly. Let me sleep the past 24 hours off and I will come to the homestead first thing tomorrow morning.”
Nicole is seated in a second-row pew in the little white church that doubles as a townhall for Purgatory. With the arrival of a new calendar year, Purgatory residents voted Nicole into the freshly abandoned sheriff’s position. She suspects that the McCreadys’ influence in town had something to do with it, although the only evidence she has to support that theory is her gut feeling and a wink she received from Mr. McCready when she was presented with the sheriff’s star.

Thus, Nicole finds herself in the drafty wooden church, sitting on her first townhall meeting in the official capacity as a sheriff. Based on the simple fact that all official positions in town are held by men – and by law couldn’t be held by women – Nicole imagined the townhall meeting to be filled with men as well. To her surprise, the meeting is sparsely attended, yet the majority of townsfolk here are women. *Go figure.*

The focus of today’s heated debate is the revival of town’s schoolhouse; Purgatory has been in a dire need for an educational institution for the past five years, since the last teacher – Ms. Griffin – married Henry Carlson and was forced to leave the post. The fact that married women could not be teachers has never registered to Nicole until today and she struggles to understand the merits of such a practice.

Nobody is questioning the need for a school in town. Instead, the reason for the incessant bickering is seated in the first pew, in front and a bit to the right from Nicole. Rosita Bustillos, currently employed as a barmaid at the boardinghouse – although many argued here today that her duties often expanded into entertaining the clientele as well – has offered her services to become Purgatory’s next teacher. Although Nicole has never interacted with Ms. Bustillos before, there is no doubt that the woman is exceptionally intelligent, literate, and knowledgeable; her qualifications for the job are not being questioned today, as much as her integrity, virtue, and principles are, solely based on her past and current employment.

“It would appear we found ourselves at an impasse,” Mrs. Gretta Perley, a young widow, who seems to hold much authority over today’s gathering, states. “Purgatory’s children deserve the opportunity to be educated, yet the schoolhouse is dilapidated, and the only candidate for the teacher’s position we’ve seen in the past five years has brought up opposition on ethical grounds.”

The assembly quietens, considering the potential outcomes of yet another year without a school in town. Many a young child in Purgatory is illiterate, an occurrence that is less and less prevalent in the rest of the Union.

“What if – hear me out – what if we employ help of someone else to mend the schoolhouse but, more importantly, to affirm Ms. Bustillos’ honorable intentions?” Mrs. McCready’s voice breaks the silence of the church-room. “Purgatory’s sheriff’s department can finally pride itself on employing righteous, upstanding men, like Sheriff Haught and Deputy Dolls.”

“Hear, hear!” comes a cheer from the room, both gratifying and humbling to Nicole. She looks at Mrs. McCready but the woman’s face is unreadable as always.

“What say you, Sheriff Haught? Would you be willing to undertake the demanding task of repairing the schoolhouse and monitoring the classroom activities for a sign of any debauchery and indecency, once the school year begins?” Mrs. Perley addresses Nicole, challenge lacing her tone.

All eyes are on Nicole now, except for Ms. Bustillos’, who sits stock still in the front pew.

Getting up to her feet with as much poise and authority as she can muster, Nicole responds earnestly, “Mrs. McCready, Mrs. Perley, and the assembly. I am honored you’d consider my humble person as trustworthy and sufficiently fitting to aid you in this pivotal moment for the town of Purgatory.”
She looks at Ms. Bustillos, whose posture became even more stiff since Nicole took the floor, if that’s even possible. “My deputies and I will readily assist with timely restorations of the schoolhouse and I will personally oversee and vouch for Ms. Bustillos’ curriculum.”

Rosita Bustillos turns around at Nicole’s pronouncement, visibly astounded and grateful. Did she really expect Nicole to deny the request, like some bigoted and chauvinistic small-town sheriff? It was a no brainer for Nicole who stood tall and proud in support of yet another courageous woman.

After the townhall meeting let out, Ms. Bustillos lead Nicole and Dolls to the old schoolhouse on the east side of town, sitting on the road leading to the Earp homestead. The structural integrity of the building was intact, and Dolls and Nicole both agreed that new windows and major work on the roof was all that is needed to bring the building up to full functionality.

Jumping on the opportunity to have additional responsibilities outside of the homestead, Nicole offered to gather all the needed building materials and begin the improvements first thing tomorrow morning. There is not much she can do on the homestead this deep into winter; the freezing temperatures and a thick blanket of snow covering the land prevent any meaningful work. Spending idle time in the house is not ideal either, as the atmosphere between her and the Earp sisters has been strained and uneasy since she moved back in at the beginning of the month.

Nicole’s eagerness to commence the work on the schoolhouse without delay earns her a sincere gratefulness from Ms. Bustillos. The woman presents multiple suggestions of repaying them for their kindness but both lawmen respectfully decline the offers of baked goods or skillfully mixed drinks at the boardinghouse.

Sensing eventually that their rejections of Ms. Bustillos’ attempts of expressing her gratitude may be received as impolite, Nicole accepts the woman’s offer to trim both of their hair. That’s how the three of them find themselves at the sheriff’s office, Dolls seated in sheriff’s desk chair – Nicole’s chair – while Ms. Bustillos shaves his neck.

“What do you think, Deputy Dolls?” Ms. Bustillos places a hand-held mirror in Dolls’ hand. He looks handsome like this, hair trimmed close to skin, his temples and back of his neck shaved clean. “It’s a good look on you, Dolls.”

“Wow. Much obliged, Ms. Bustillos.” Getting up from Nicole’s chair, he adds, “Since we’ll be seeing much more of each other now, please call me Dolls.” He extends his hand to her in a gesture of thanks, as well as an introduction.

“Rosita,” the woman offers with a confident smile. “Your turn, Sheriff Haught.”

“Oh, what the hell, just call me Cole,” Nicole teases, with a feigned exasperation, taking Doll’s spot. Her hair has gotten much longer in the past couple of months than she strictly prefers; slicked back, it reaches past her shoulders. In all honesty, getting it trimmed has been on Nicole’s to-do list for a few weeks now but she’s never gotten around to it, having her mind occupied full-time with her new job, the homestead, and… Waverly Earp.

“You prefer your hair longer, I see, sheriff?” Rosita runs her hands through Nicole’s thin hair. The gesture startles Nicole at first; this is the first physical contact she’s had with another person,
excluding random handshakes, in months.

“Uhm, yeah. Yes. I like it longer but it’s gotten out of control recently, even for me,” Nicole responds, gathering her thoughts.

Rosita must sense her unease yet she continues running her hands through Nicole’s hair, massaging her scalp softly. “Okay, how about I trim it to just below your ear, Cole?” She gestures to the spot where Nicole’s ear meets her neck.

“That’d be great. Thank you.”

Rosita is fast and efficient with scissors, suggesting that hairdressing may have been one of the multiple professions she’s held in her life. Task completed, she brings the little hand-held mirror, bowing over Nicole’s shoulder, and looking expectantly at her reflection, “How does it feel?”

“You look like a schoolboy, Cole,” Dolls’ booming laughter fills the room, just as somebody enters the building.

“Dolls, you in there? Don’t think you’re getting out of having drinks with me tonight,” comes Wynonna’s holler from the hallway. She walks towards the doors of the sheriff’s office left slightly ajar and sends Nicole – as well as Rosita bending over her shoulder – a raised eyebrow, her countenance hardening instantaneously.

“Rosita Bustillos, Sheriff Haught,” she greets them yet her voice is laced with contempt.

Dolls, still laughing, grabs Wynonna’s elbow and walks her out of the office, “Let’s go Earp, Sheriff Haught has schoolwork to attend to. Get it? Schoolwork?”

Nicole doesn’t see or hear Wynonna’s response, as they walk out the door.

x

Patting Nedley’s neck, Nicole throws a warm blanket over his back. After making sure he has enough feed and water to last through the night, she trudges through the knee-deep snow towards the main house.

Today was unexpected but Nicole begins to think that her job as a sheriff could actually turn out as fulfilling as homesteading is for her, if only she gets to help people like Rosita Bustillos and instill meaningful change in their little community. Her spirits lifted, Nicole feels lighter and more content than she has in two months, and she suspects it has to do with something more than getting rid of the extra weight in hair.

Nicole enters the house and hears the Earp sisters’ voices coming from the kitchen. She’s excited to share the events of today with Waverly, as she’s certain she will understand and appreciate the need for Purgatory to have a functioning school.

“Waverly, Wynonna,” she greets the two women in the kitchen, bursting with joyful energy to share the events of her day with somebody, and notices Waverly’s eyes going comically round at her appearance.

“Your hair! It looks… nice?” Waverly looks at her uncertain, big eyes blinking owlishly.
“You have one of Purgatory’s top whores to thank for that, Waves,” Wynonna responds cheerfully, yet Nicole can sense the undercurrent of a challenge boiling under the older Earp’s skin.

“What in the world are you taking about, Wynonna?” Waverly demands. Nicole has gotten accustomed to obnoxious jabs and spiteful remarks from Wynonna, since they were forced to share dinners together at the homestead. This was the first time Waverly interfered, although Nicole is not sure she will go much further than demanding an explanation.

“I saw Red getting that haircut from Rosita today in the sheriff’s office of all places. She was awfully chummy. Can’t say I blame you, Red – great tits on that one.”

Eyes pointed towards the floor and a quiet, “Oh,” is all Nicole gets from Waverly. Her blood boils with indignation at both Wynonna’s crude remarks and Waverly’s lack of response. Nicole is a step away from defending herself – as well as Rosita – but one look at Wynonna’s cocky grin has her taking a step backwards. The older Earp is spoiling for a fight, has been for weeks, and Nicole refuses to give her the satisfaction and force Waverly to pick sides; it’s not that she’s not confident she could one-up Wynonna, it’s more than she doesn’t need to be reminded of being Waverly’s second choice.

Nicole breathes heavily through her mouth, turns on her heel, and leaves the kitchen with a dismissive, “Whatever, Earp.” She heads for the barn, where she knows Nedley will offer her enough warmth and companionship to last a few hours. The persistent tears flood her eyes from anger, disappointment, and an overwhelming sense of loneliness.

The days are getting longer, Nicole distractedly notices, leaving her office just after 5 pm, as the sun sets over the Little Rocky Mountains. She secures her Stetson firmly on her head and walks briskly towards the town’s winter stables, where Nedley waits for her to go back to the homestead.

A scuffle outside of the boardinghouse just a couple of buildings down from the sheriff’s station, draws Nicole’s attention. She sighs in disappointment – why do things like that always happen when she’s already off the clock? – but changes direction and dutifully approaches the commotion.

Two men, sporting identical long black coats, are forcing a woman into handcuffs – a woman, who happens to be none else but Wynonna Earp.

Still sore after the most recent spat they had over Rosita, Nicole doesn’t even spare Wynonna a perfunctory look, addressing the two men instead, “Gentlemen, Sheriff Haught,” she opens the lapel of her coat to reveal the shining star underneath. “What seems to be the issue here?”

“Sheriff. We’re detectives with the Pinkerton Agency and we have it on good authority that this woman here is Sally Skull, recurring horse thief, recently accused of shooting and seriously wounding one Mr. Jeffrey Dickson,” one of the detectives passes Nicole a wanted poster with an uncanny likeness of Wynonna’s and $800 listed as a reward.

Nicole looks at Wynonna then, the other woman’s chin held up high in defiance, blue eyes burning with provocation. It would be so easy to let the Pinkertons take Wynonna away; she is more than likely guilty of all the charges the man listed, if not more; she also has been a major thorn in Nicole’s side and her absence would undoubtedly lead to more cordial, maybe even companionable, relations
between her and Waverly.

“There must be a major misunderstanding, gentlemen!” As much as her sanity would improve with Wynonna gone, Nicole couldn’t do this to Waverly. “You see, your captive is Ms. Wynonna Earp, my soon to be sister in law. Ms. Earp is not… well liked… in town but someone must have gone far out of their way to play such an elaborate joke on her. If you’d kindly release her and join me in my office, I’ll gladly testify on her behalf. When did you say has the most recent accusation occurred? Ms. Earp has not left the town in over a year now, a fact I am certain of, and can find numerous witnesses to corroborate on,” Nicole lies easily.

Under the spell of authority and confidence Nicole projects, one of the men uncuffs Wynonna, while the other one sheepishly offers his apologies, “It won’t be necessary, Sheriff Haught. We appreciate your assistance on the matter. I hope you will understand that we often act on information that may not be entirely truthful and did not intend any disrespect towards you or your family in-law.”

“Your apology is much appreciated but not needed. Residents of Purgatory and certainly my entire department are deeply obliged for your dedication to the dangerous work of tracking outlaws, especially this far North. Please don’t hesitate to let me know if you ever require any assistance in town,” tickling both men’s egos, a trick she learned from Pearl, Nicole firmly grabs Wynonna’s elbow and walks towards the sheriff’s building.

Once inside, Nicole observes the receding shadows of the two detectives from behind the safety of the window blinds.

“I uhm… Thank you, Nicole.” Wynonna offers quietly behind her. The lack of snark or contempt renders her voice unfamiliar to Nicole’s ears, as does the use of her given name.

“I did it for Waverly, not for you, Earp. God knows she can’t afford to lose another person so soon after Wyatt left.” Turning away from the window to look at Wynonna, Nicole adds, “If you ever hurt her, Wynonna, I will track you and turn you in myself, bounty or not.”

The older Earp sister surprises Nicole, clasping her hand in gratefulness and begrudging respect, eyes moist with unshed tears, “We may have just found a common ground and a shared goal in Waverly’s well-being, Red.”

Chapter End Notes

Historically, teaching was considered a male profession in the US and it was very well paid. Civil War changed it all - with most men gone at war, women were asked to fill in the vacated teacher spots - albeit at considerably lower wages, as these were supposed to be temporary positions. When the men came back from war, they didn't want those jobs back, as within a few short years teaching became a low-paying female job. Crazy enough, only unmarried women were allowed to hold the teaching post - makes me wonder if it's the reason why teachers in the US schools are still primarily referred to as "Ms.", regardless of their marital status.

The "drunk tank" or jail of the time would look something like this:
March, 18X5

Nicole is steering a horse-drawn plow faced with steel saw blades that she acquired a few weeks back in conjunction with a powerful draft horse, heavy bags of fertilizers, and several sacks of seeds to sow. The unseasonably warm and sunny weather caused the frozen soil to thaw enough, enabling Nicole to plow and till the ground.

Her plan is to have 20 acres of spring wheat planted by the end of the week, hoping it will yield 400 bushels come summer. She was worried she’d miss the warm weather window, due to her obligations as Purgatory’s sheriff, yet Wynonna came through and offered to take over the tilling and sowing tomorrow.

Things at the homestead have gotten – dare she say it? – better, since Wynonna’s run-in with the Pinkertons. The older Earp is still a major pain in Nicole’s backside, still snarky and teasing, yet her jabs are friendlier and her barbs lack their past razor-sharp edge. Waverly has certainly noticed the tentative peace between the two women, if her lighthearted, chatty, and much more radiant disposition is anything to go by. She hasn’t asked for a reason for this unexpected truce, and neither Nicole nor Wynonna offered one, in a silent agreement of protecting Waverly.

Nicole’s about done with the field for today, the sun swiftly descending behind the Little Rockies, as a horse-cart tandem arrives at the homestead. She rushes to greet the sisters and get inside the house to reveal a surprise she’s been preparing for a week.

“Waverly, Wynonna,” a bit out of breath, Nicole meets them on the front porch.

“Hi Red. What’s the hurry? You ran so fast, your face matches your hair,” Wynonna doesn’t disappoint.

“I have a surprise for Waverly inside,” Nicole answers, already opening the front door.

“Unless that surprise involves two hunky ranch hands, willing to…” but Wynonna’s undoubtedly witty comeback is interrupted by chirping noises coming from within the drawing room and Waverly’s excited squeal.

“Nicole! Oh my! Wynonna, look! Look at those chicks!” Already on her knees by a box insulated by a straw bedding to keep the little creatures warm right in front of the fireplace, Waverly picks up a black chick and holds it close to her chest.

The scene before her is that of a pure, unadulterated joy, and Nicole can only look on dumbly with the largest dimpled grin on her own face. Wynonna looks at her in an amused exasperation, and shaking her head, she murmurs a quiet, “You got it bad, Red-face,” that only Nicole catches, before she kneels down by her sister and joins in with the merriment.

“They are only a week old, Waverly, so you will need to make sure they stay plenty warm. The farmer who sold them to me said they will need 90 degrees heat for the first week, followed by a 5-degree decline in temperature every week, until they are fully feathered in about 5-6 weeks. I should have the coop finished for them long before then.”
Waverly nods solemnly, like a child who got their first pet and promises wholeheartedly to take care of it, “Oh course. I’ll be the best chicken mom in all of Purgatory! Maybe I can find a book on how to properly care for them at the town’s library… Or! I’m sure Aunt Gus will know all about chickens – the Gibsons had a large farm back East…”

Wynonna looks at her rambling little sister with as much love and dedication as Waverly is currently displaying towards the chicks. The older Earp mouths a sincere, “thank you,” to Nicole, seeing that her sister forgot her manners in the whirlwind of excitement. A dopey smile still adorning her face, Nicole shakes her head in dismissal – if a few chicks is all it takes to make Waverly Earp happy, Nicole will willingly convert the entire homestead into a poultry farm tomorrow.

x

Waverly has been cooped up at the homestead with the chicks for the past week, not willing to leave their side. Last night’s snowfall gave Nicole an idea of how to draw her outside the house and break – at least temporarily – her obsession with the birds.

“Waverly, come help me outside?” Nicole requests, walking through the entry door.

“But it’s cold outside,” Waverly whines – honest to god, whines, “and I have to keep the fire going so the little ones stay warm.”

Rolling her eyes behind Waverly’s back, Nicole responds, trying to hide her amusement at her antics, “It’s actually pretty nice in the sun today and I think you’ll benefit from being outside.”

Waverly obliges, albeit reluctantly and begrudgingly, and meets Nicole in front of the house. Nedley stands patiently by Nicole’s side, as she lays out an assortment of wooden and metal curry combs, hoof picks, and brushes. She’s glad Waverly took after Wynonna lately and wears heavy wool pants around the homestead instead of her typical skirts, both for comfort and for warmth, as it will make Nicole’s job today that much easier.

Picking up a curry comb, Nicole summons Waverly towards the horse, “Take this comb, Waverly, and curry in circles from Nedley’s neck and work your way towards his tail.”

At Waverly’s stunted expression, Nicole encourages, “Go on. I’ve seen you watch me do it a hundred times before. Nedley is a calm steed and I’ll hold his bridle. I promise you’re safe.”

Waverly exhales deeply and approaches the horse with a comb in her shaky hand. She goes on to curry Nedley skittishly who stirs initially but calms down instantaneously at Nicole’s soothing words. “Be more assured in your movements, horses can sense your emotions and will often respond negatively to your nerves.”

Looking at the large horse with reverence, Waverly continues currying Nedley with growing confidence, the horse clearly enjoying the attention.

“That’s great, Waverly. Here, take the bridle? I’ll brush the rest of the dirt out,” Nicole directs, nearly forcing the leather into Waverly’s uncertain hands.

Nedley clearly dislikes the quick, harsh movements of the firm brush, neighing at Nicole in annoyance yet still allowing Waverly to control him. Sufficiently satisfied with the lack of large dust clouds coming off Nedley any longer, Nicole puts the brush down and offers a carrot to Waverly.
“Put it in the palm of your hand, like this,” Nicole demonstrates with an open palm, while Nedley tries to use the opportunity to steal the treat, causing both women to laugh. “Not yet, Nedley. Give Waverly a chance,” Nicole admonishes, petting the horse lovingly on his neck.

Waverly grabs the carrot in her hand just like Nicole showed her and sheepishly moves it closer to Nedley’s muzzle. The horse doesn’t waste his second chance and greedily scarfs the treat down, causing Waverly’s eyes to widen comically in astonishment at having a large beast like Nedley be so cautious and gentle with his mouth.

Looking at Nicole with a dreamy smile on her face, Waverly says, “Wyatt never let me near his horse. Always said it was a man’s job…”

Nedley chooses this moment to neigh, as if sensing Nicole’s agitation. “Nedley and I both agree that it’s a load of horseshit,” Nicole offers with a grin, attempting to brighten the mood.

She walks towards the porch, where a wool blanket and her saddle hang off the rail. Nicole is not in the slightest concerned about leaving Waverly with the pinto – he’s a gentle giant, sniffing the girl for a sign of more carrots, and coercing another giggle out of her. Nicole throws the blanket on Nedley’s back and saddles him, tightening the straps firmly around his underbelly.

Standing on Nedley’s left flank, Nicole invites Waverly to join her there. “Okay, so each time before riding, you have to check your horse’s hooves and should curry and brush it, like you just did Nedley. I’ll teach you how to saddle him next time but today I thought we could start by having you ride Nedley around the yard.”

Waverly looks at Nicole as if she grew two heads, “Nicole, I… umm. I can’t. I don’t know how to ride a horse.”

As if Nicole hasn’t known that already. “I know, Waverly. That’s why we’re here today. There is enough fresh snow in the yard to break your fall, if it ever gets to that. I uhm… I hate you being stuck at the homestead and depending on others for rides to and from Purgatory. I’ll teach you how to ride and we’ll get you a suitable horse once you feel comfortable… That is… if you… if you want to…” Nicole’s confidence wavers, as she gets nervous and scratches the back of her neck for comfort. What if Waverly doesn’t want to learn how to ride? It’s awfully presumptuous of her to push her definition of independence on Waverly.

“Really? You’d… you’d do that for me?” Waverly’s voice is so small and filled with incredulity, it nearly breaks Nicole’s heart.

“Of course,” she responds easily and is welcomed by a bone crushing hug. Waverly’s arms wrap snuggly around her waist and her temple rests on Nicole’s chest, the crown of her head immediately underneath Nicole’s chin. Their bodies fit together like two pieces of a puzzle and Nicole is so dumbstruck her arms hover uselessly inches from Waverly’s back.

Before Nicole can gather her faculties and allow her brain to inform the rest of her body to reciprocate the embrace, Waverly breaks the contact, a beautiful bashful smile adorning her features. Nicole decides to write Waverly’s reddening cheeks off on the account of a slight frost and a chilly wind.

Excitedly, Waverly claps her hands, “Okay, where do we start?”

Thoughts racing with memories of the last time she had Waverly in her arms, Nicole has to physically shake her head to disperse the emotions brought about by a simple gesture of being on the receiving end of Waverly’s hug.
“You’ll want to hoist yourself up by placing your left foot in the stirrup and your left hand on the horn, like this,” Nicole demonstrates, in one fluid motion. She dismounts, grabs the reins, and waits for Waverly to repeat the motion.

The girl positions herself properly, yet clearly doesn’t possess the upper body strength required to pull her weight 5 ft off the ground, bouncing hopelessly on her right leg in an attempt to gain enough momentum. Nedley, to his credit, is not bothered in the slightest by her attempts.

“Ugh, Nicole… a little help? I don’t think I can do this on my own…”

Hands still holding the reins, Nicole walks behind Waverly’s hopping form. She wants to help but is terrified of crossing any boundaries – their convoluted past as well as Waverly’s history with Pike keep Nicole rooted on the spot. Waverly looks behind her shoulder, a pleading expression on her determined face.

Nicole stands a step behind Waverly and asks, unsure, “Do you mind if I…”

“Just give me a push, Nicole. Gosh, it looked so easy when you did it!” Waverly seems unfazed and oblivious to Nicole’s internal struggle.

Nicole repositions Waverly’s left hand to grant her more leverage, asks her to bend her right knee more, and placing trembling hands on Waverly’s waist, gives her a lift. Before they know it, Waverly sits proudly on top of Nedley, face split in a toothy grin.

“Holy cow, Nicole! I’m so far off the ground!”

“Okay, don’t get too excited and don’t wiggle too much or Nedley will take it as a go-ahead,” Nicole requests with a hint of laughter, as she walks around and adjust the stirrups’ length to better fit Waverly’s shorter legs.

Nicole ties a rope to Nedley’s bridle and passes the reins up to Waverly, “Nedley will react to your body movement to direct him. Incline your body forward?”

Waverly does as instructed and the horse starts walking forward, yet stops almost immediately, as the excited girl squeals and pulls his reins back minutely. “Horses are also very sensitive to the direction they get from the reins. Try to keep them loose in your hands for now, with plenty of slack, and let’s try again with walking forward?” Nicole continues to explain.

The lesson continues and soon enough Waverly has Nedley walking in the circle around the yard. Nicole is still holding the long rope she’s attached to his bridle but – whether she realizes it or not – Waverly is doing all the work directing the horse.

Seeing how at least half an hour has passed and with concern for Waverly’s comfort in the cold weather, Nicole proposes, “I think this might be enough for one day? How do you feel?”

With an adorable pout, Waverly concedes, “Yeah, you might be right. This is much harder work than I thought and I am getting cold…”

“Okay, direct Nedley to the barn? You did great today, Waverly. If you feel up for it, we can practice more tomorrow after I return from Purgatory – maybe we can even try trotting, if you feel comfortable.”

“I’d love to, Nicole.”

Once by the barn, Nicole helps Waverly down, “You want to take your right foot out of the stirrup
and bring it near your left leg, and then you can simply just incline your weight against Nedley and slide down.” Determined not to have Waverly fall even once today, Nicole is right behind her, guiding her descent with steady hands.

Nicole takes a step back, as Waverly finds her balance again. “Thank you, Nicole. You’re a very patient teacher. I can’t wait to ride Nedley again tomorrow.”

With one more short hug in thanks, Waverly retreats quickly towards the house.

What is she doing in there? Waverly can’t help but wonder, peeking from behind the drawing room curtains at the barn, where she can hear the incessant noises of wood chopping coming from. Nicole rode back from work about an hour ago, yet she has still to arrive indoors. Waverly eyes the neatly stacked pile of firewood on their front porch, thinking that Nicole’s work is clearly unnecessary at the moment. She would much prefer that Nicole finally walked through the door so they could share dinner together and exchange stories of their days.

They have become… friends? – or at least Waverly hopes so – over the past couple of months; Nicole proving her dedication, kindness, and loyalty, over and over again, and Waverly’s anger at being misled dissipating into thin air and her broken heart slowly mending. She can’t help but appreciate how Nicole is the only other person after Uncle Curtis who sees her potential, who encourages and helps her grow and prosper.

She has to admit that Wynonna’s sudden acceptance of Nicole, which quickly turned into an odd teasing relationship between the two that Waverly doesn’t entirely understand, was a turning point for them all. Waverly pondered on numerous occasions what she’d have done if forced to choose between her sister and Nicole, and the brief thought still brings unpleasant goosebumps to her arms.

Patience thin and not willing to wait for Nicole to grace her with her presence a minute longer, Waverly makes two steaming hot cups of tea, stacks two layers of blankets over her shoulders, and heads outside, determined to bring the woman indoors.

Cow’s crap, it’s cold outside! Nicole must be freezing to death, chopping wood they honestly don’t need any more of. Waverly hastily slips through the barn door, left slightly ajar, yet Nicole doesn’t notice her, fully engrossed in the task at hand.

Oh, how wrong Waverly was to be concerned about Nicole staying warm! The woman is sweating with exertion, rhythmically swinging the axe over her head and bringing it down with full force at an innocent piece of wood, as if it committed some unspeakable crime against her. She is stripped down to her undershirt, which is soaked with sweat; the flannel button-up shirt, vest, and coat lie discarded on a bale of hay – as are Nicole’s breast binding bandages, Waverly notices distractedly.

The cyclical pattern of Nicole’s swings, as well as the taut muscles flexing tirelessly underneath her undershirt, have Waverly gawk on, as if hypnotized. Eyes following the definition of Nicole’s forearm and bicep, up to her shoulder blades, and down her powerful spine, Waverly only manages to snap out of it when her heavy, burning gaze reaches Nicole’s backside, hidden by heavy wool trousers. She feels herself blush furiously and is utterly confounded by her body’s response.

Waverly clears her throat, alerting Nicole to her presence, “I brought you some hot tea, thinking you must be freezing out here…”
Startled, Nicole turns around and exhales, “Oh, it’s just you.” She wipes the sweat off of her forehead, with a contrite, “I’m sorry. I must have lost the sense of time.”

Hearing the defeated and gloomy tone of Nicole’s voice, Waverly manages to tear her traitorous thoughts away from the glorious, sweaty sight in front of her. She offers Nicole one of the hot cups, plops down on the closest hay bale, and tries for levity, “Want to share what that piece of wood did to offend you?”

Nicole puts her flannel on – thank god for small mercies – and sits down next to Waverly. “It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“I do, Nicole… You can talk to me, you know? I know I’m like a chatter box half the time but I’ll gladly listen too… Was it work? Did something happen?” Waverly coaxes gently, bumping her shoulder against Nicole’s.

Sighing deeply, eyes fixed firmly on the cup in her hands, Nicole begins, “Yeah, it was just one of those days at work…”

Waverly lets the silence envelop them, giving Nicole the time to decide whether she wants to continue, her eyes attentively watching Nicole’s face.

“Remember how just last month I was finally content and happy in my post, being able to help people, and fixing that schoolhouse?” Nicole takes a quick look at Waverly but redirects her eyes swiftly back to the cup. “I guess I learned today that sheriff’s work has an ugly side to it too, that it involves responding to heinous crimes and… and dealing with some truly abhorrent people.”

Whatever happened today has Nicole rattled like Waverly hasn’t seen ever before; she scoots closer, until their sides from shoulders all the way to their knees meet, in an attempt to provide comfort and silent support.

“I rode out to the Arbour homestead down south – you know the Arbours, right? Their uhm… their daughter, Joyce, was raped last night…” Nicole’s eyes fill with unshed tears and she swallows heavily. “The perpetrator was Tucker Gardner, the heir of Josh “cattle baron” Gardner. He’s such a despicable scum, Waverly… I uhm… I brought him down to the courthouse but the judge – seeing that he’s dealing with a Gardner – dropped the charges from rape and battery to… assault with intent to seduce… What even is that? His laughter, god, I wish I just beat him to death, Waverly…” Her body shaking with the intensity of today, tears freely falling down her cheeks now, Nicole is lost in thought. Waverly envelops Nicole in a side embrace, running her hand up and down her back in what she hopes is a calming gesture.

Nicole wipes off the tears furiously, “And Joyce? Waverly… she’s only a year older than you… Looking at her today all I could think of was… you… and that day nearly a year ago now, when I walked into Shorty’s and unknowingly interrupted Pike. What if I hadn’t come in time? What if I had taken longer to get started that morning? God, I am not proud of killing the man but if all a rapist gets from our justice system is a slap on the wrist, I am glad my bullet hit true that day.”

“I’m glad it did too…” Waverly quietly offers, still running a comforting hand over Nicole’s back, which is now bent, Nicole’s face hiding in her hands. They never talked about Pike’s attempted assault before, memory of which is still fresh on Waverly’s mind.

Not wanting nor needing to turn this into a conversation about herself, she focuses on how betrayed Nicole must feel working within a crooked system. “I know you must feel like you failed today but you mustn’t give up, Nicole. We need more lawmen like you, lawmen who are empathetic and kind and devoted to the people – all the people – they are supposed to protect… Wyatt wouldn’t have
even ridden out to see the Arbours today. And I know the laws are tilted against us now but they will eventually change, if only we have good people like you fighting for what’s right.’’

Sobbing quietly, Nicole straightens up and looks up into Waverly’s eyes. All she can think of in this moment is that she’d do anything to take some of Nicole’s pain away and replace it with the conviction and strength she feels. Waverly opens her arms invitingly and Nicole falls into the embrace fully, head resting on her shoulder.

They stay like that for long minutes, Waverly subconsciously humming a vaguely calming melody, until Nicole’s crying subsides. Waverly gets up, offering her hand to Nicole, and silently leading her back to the house, where the bright light of oil lamps and the heat from the fireplace envelop them both in a blanket of security and temporary protection from the outside world.

Chapter End Notes

Rape was illegal in the Old West but (unfortunately) it was most often committed by white men on women of color. Judges almost never prosecuted them for rape, choosing instead a more vague "assault with intent to seduce" - I didn't even make it up. You have one guess as to what happened to black men who even dared to look at a white woman at that time (not to mention attempt a rape).
Chapter Notes

This chapter comes to you from the Peruvian Andes - that's why it's a bit later than usual. Enjoy!

April, 18X5

Just as their double date at Shorty’s nears its end, Big Nose Kate walks in with a stranger in tow.

“There you are, Sheriff Haught. We’ve been looking all over the place for ya!” Kate exclaims, nearing their table. Both Dolls and Wynonna throw surprised looks at Nicole, presumably because she’s been spending all of her time between the homestead and the sheriff’s office and doesn’t really socialize outside of their small group. Nicole’s recognition of the stranger brings even Waverly’s eyebrows up in question.

“Calamity Jane? You old devil! I didn’t expect to see you so soon!” The two embrace in a bear hug, patting each other dramatically on their backs, drawing curious eyes from a few other patrons in Shorty’s dining hall, none of whom are accustomed to seeing their solemn and reserved sheriff act so gregariously.

“What can I say, missed you already,” the stranger – Calamity Jane – responds with a smug grin, holding Nicole’s shoulders at an arm’s length. “Say, do you have time for a drink or two? I’m passing through town and must head out tomorrow – figured I could spend some time with you and Kate.” Jane throws a questioning gaze at Nicole’s companions still seated at the table.

Nicole looks to Waverly – is she asking for permission? – prompting the other girl to say with as friendly a smile as she can muster, “Sure, Cole. We’re already done with dinner. Wynonna and Dolls will keep me company.”

Solitary eyebrow inclined in inquiry, Jane simply wraps her arm through Nicole’s elbow, her other arm circling Kate’s waist, and walks them out the door with a quiet, “Seeing that you’re allowed to fraternize with old friends, let’s make it a memorable night, shall we?!” that Waverly still catches.

Pivoting in her chair to face the window, brows pulled together in consternation, Waverly strains her neck to see where Nicole was whisked to. “What is sh… What is he thinking going into the boardinghouse in the middle of the day?” Waverly hisses, more to herself than to Wynonna and Dolls. “He’s a sheriff now, that comes with certain expectations! What will people think?!” The wrong pronoun grates on Waverly’s tongue but she knows she can’t afford a slip-up in a crowded saloon.

For whatever reason, this situation is apparently hilarious to both her sister and Dolls, which Waverly finds entirely inappropriate. “I don’t think the residents of Purgatory would be concerned about Sheriff Haught’s virtuousness, Waverly… unless you are?” Dolls argues with a hint of a smirk.
“Me? I’m not… Why would I…? Are you saying I should be? Because I’ll let you know that Champ tried to pull that stunt on me and I won’t let my fiancé stray like that! Oh no, mister!” Waverly is fuming, trying to keep her voice down, although their table still has many intrigued eyes focused on them. She’s not sure where the possessiveness is coming from – she and Nicole are after all just friends; Waverly’s own explicit requirement has made that very clear – and she writes it off as nothing more than a need to save face and act appropriately with respect to her supposed future husband in the eyes of the interlopers.

“Well, sis, I say it’s unacceptable! We should march straight into that hookshop and at least make sure that your respectable boyfriend has not fallen down the road of debauchery and depravity!” Wynonna suggests eagerly.

“Yes! That’s a brilliant idea!” Waverly is up and out of her chair, barely registering her sister’s snickering giggles behind her. Wait, were both of them teasing her just then? Whatever their attitudes may have been, Waverly is already devoted to this plan and strides confidently outside, her coat forgotten on the rack by the door.

Halfway across the road she silently prays that either Dolls or Wynonna followed her out, since she’s never been to the boardinghouse before and she may just lose her courage if she has to face it alone.

To her utter relief, she feels two people fall into step behind her. “We’ve got you, babygirl,” comes a whisper from her right, Wynonna’s voice no longer teasing.

The inside of the boardinghouse is larger, cleaner, and more splendid than Waverly expected; she’s ashamed to admit she always imagined it as this dirty, dark, nearly dungeon-like room, full of grimy drunks and half-naked women. The reality couldn’t have been further from her expectations. The walls of the great room are covered with a green wallpaper of intricate design; the bar is more grandiose than at Shorty’s – long, polished mahogany counter stands tall and shiny in front of an enormous wall mirror; little tables and comfortably looking sitting sofas, upholstered with velvety red fabric, pepper the floor.

There are a few men – all dressed to the nines – playing cards at one of the tables; another man sits close to a woman on a sofa, conversing quietly. The women wear more appropriate clothing than Waverly expected as well; sure, their collarbones are exposed by décolletage necklines and there are no stockings covering their legs underneath the heavy skirts, yet overall there isn’t much skin revealed. The only part of the establishment that truly makes Waverly blush are the nude paintings embellishing the walls.

Waverly finally spots Nicole sitting with Big Nose Kate and Calamity Jane on a sofa hidden in the corner of the room. A young girl, younger than Waverly if she had to venture a guess, scurries to place a bottle of bourbon and three glasses on a coffee table in front of the women. They are laughing, jovial and uninhibited in their merriment, but Waverly’s too far to catch their conversation. Pulled by the sleeve by her sister, Waverly sits down on a barstool, settling for quietly observing from the distance – for now.

“Two bourbons, neat, and uhm… and a Mint Julep?” Wynonna orders for them, looking at Waverly to approve her choice but the younger Earp couldn’t care less in this moment. She never drinks alcohol and the first sip has her scrunching her nose, her body shuddering involuntarily; the second sip is better, refreshing and sweet; by the third swig, Waverly can’t even taste the bourbon any longer.

“See, Waves, nothing to worry about,” Wynonna says, pointing towards the corner. “Let Red have a few drinks and a laugh; lord knows she deserves that much after putting up with your uncoordinated ass to teach you how to ride. And who knows, maybe she’ll score some tonight too,” she snickers,
looking over Waverly’s shoulder at Dolls.

Waverly follows her sister’s eyes and catches Dolls making “quit it” gestures with his hand; the man gives her a rare blinding smile and offers in a whisper as to not be overheard, “Nicole’s been working tirelessly the past three months, Waverly. I think she deserves a carefree night out.”

Alcohol relaxing her muscles, Waverly thinks that maybe Dolls and Wynonna are right, maybe Nicole needs a night to unwind. Yet… if it’s only about that, why hasn’t Nicole invited them to join in the merriment? Why hasn’t she invited Waverly? Is she ashamed of her? Sick and tired of spending time together? Or has Nicole purposefully walked into the boardinghouse with every intention of seducing one of the two women currently seated on either side of her?

Waverly barely registers a fresh drink placed in front of her, as she looks towards Nicole. Calamity Jane has her hand resting on Nicole’s thigh in a clearly intimate gesture; from the way her body is angled comfortably towards the other woman, Waverly infers that the two share a past she was not aware of before tonight. It grates on Waverly’s nerves and tastes heavily of betrayal and abandonment.

“Hey, what’s going on, Waves?” Wynonna asks quietly. “Your face just went through an epic emotional journey. Wait… are you jealous of Red?” the incredulous tone draws Waverly’s attention to her sister.

“Jealous? Of course not, don’t be silly. Nicole is her own person and can spend time with whomever she chooses. I just think that… that it would have been nice to be introduced and invited. That’s all.” Waverly wills her voice to convey all the conviction she doesn’t particularly possess at the moment.

“All right then! Enough pouting – let’s go and join them!” slapping the bar counter, Wynonna offers, already on her feet.

Waverly gets up quickly and has to steady herself – the effects of the two drinks she downed in a short time since they’ve arrived at the boardinghouse manifesting itself with smugness.

“Yo, Red, care if we join? Heard that’s where the party was tonight and didn’t want to miss out!” Wynonna interrupts the three women.

“Absolutely!” Nicole eagerly responds just as Calamity Jane adds, “The more the merrier.”

“Jane, Kate, these are Dolls, Wynonna, and Waverly,” Nicole introduces, Wynonna and Dolls quickly sitting down in two large armchairs across from the sofa.

“So how do y’all know each other?” Jane starts with an ice breaker.

Waverly, still standing, arms firmly folded over her midsection, interrupts the conversation before it really begins, “Cole, a word?”

She storms outside, bourbon and indignation keeping her warm. Nicole is a step behind her.

“Waverly, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“What are you doing, Cole? Going into that place and associating with those women?” Waverly almost spits out.

Those women?” Nicole voice has a hint of steel Waverly never heard directed at her before. “Waverly, if you’re referring to Kate, there is nothing wrong with women making a living at the boardinghouse – god knows it is often the only way they can sustain themselves in Purgatory. I’d expect you of all people to be less simpleminded… As for Jane, she’s an old friend, a person who
taught me self-respect and acceptance. So what I’m doing is spending time in a great company tonight, Waverly.”

“If that’s all there is to it, why didn’t you invite us to join you? Are you… are you ashamed of me? Am I not good enough to introduce to your old friend?” Waverly whispers, the alcohol in her blood fueling the courage to finally speak her mind, stand up for herself.

Nicole stands there, blinking owlishly, “Waverly, I uhm… I didn’t think… didn’t even consider that you’d want to join us… After all, you’re not the type to frequent Purgatory’s only brothel,” Nicole tries teasing, seemingly to lighten the mood. “But please, come in and joins us now. I can’t wait to see the result of Jane and Wynonna drin…” Nicole’s upper body and arms angle towards the boardinghouse in a gesture of invitation, but Waverly’s had enough.

“Sure, choose Jane, see if I care,” she stomps petulantly in the direction of the McCreadys townhouse. She furiously swipes at the persistent tears flooding her eyes, barely registering Nicole calling after her, “Waverly, wait! What on earth?”

Dejected and thoroughly confused, Nicole walks back into the brothel to a sight of Wynonna sitting in the middle of the sofa in the spot she recently vacated, each arm thrown cockishly around both Jane’s and Kate’s shoulders. From the way Jane’s giggling like a schoolgirl, Nicole can already tell Wynonna has her old friend wrapped tightly around her finger.

“Everything okay, Red?” Wynonna asks.

“Just peachy,” Nicole mumbles. “I’ll go get another one,” she points at the nearly empty bourbon bottle on their coffee table and walks back to the bar.

“Where did Waves go?” Nicole turns around to see Wynonna following her. She sighs because dealing with one upset Earp may be her limit for tonight.

“I don’t know, Wynonna. She disappeared behind the McCreadys door after yelling at me for not inviting y’all here tonight.”

“Why didn’t you, Red? Afraid Dolls will steal your thunder?” Wynonna jokes.

“I just didn’t want Waverly to be uncomfortable, you know? And I also thought that maybe she’d relish in the opportunity to spend some time just with you – I feel like my constant presence must be suffocating sometimes,” Nicole explains derisively. Why on earth would Waverly think that she’s not enough, when Nicole clearly thinks that she’s everything?

Wynonna shrugs, “Give her some time. She’ll come around. I think she’s still… sorting through some stuff but she’ll come around.”

“I just thought we were past that, you know? I thought we could finally be friends but I guess Waverly still doesn’t trust me,” Nicole hangs her head down and hears Jane’s holler from behind, “Oi, y’all brewing that bourbon or…?”

Nicole picks up the new bottle and walks back towards her friends, leaving Wynonna and her quiet, amused, “You’re just as oblivious as she is,” behind.
Waking up, her head pounding like a herd of wild horses galloping through the prairie, her mouth dry like the deepest Utah canyons, Nicole realizes that her entire body is shaking from the cold. She looks around to establish her bearings; she’s lying on a bedroll on the floor in nothing more than her unbuttoned undershirt and underpants – all of her clothes, including her bindings, lie discarded haphazardly around her. Judging by the desk in front of her, she must have slept in her office – the office that is not heated at night. How did she end up here of all places?

The partial memories of last night come flooding back – Waverly being upset with her; Dolls and even surprisingly Wynonna consoling her; and by the end of the evening, Jane warning her that Waverly is not the girl for her, that she’ll end up breaking Nicole’s heart. Nicole can’t say that Jane’s harsh judgment of Waverly was unexpected – the older woman always had a formidable protective streak.

Lost in thought and trying to regain enough energy to get off the floor, Nicole doesn’t hear someone enter the building until they barge through her door.

“Girl, button up your shirt!” Wynonna admonishes playfully, with as much energy as if she didn’t drink just as much as Nicole last night. “Lonnie’s shift starts in a few and we figured it was probably prudent to evacuate you. Here, barefooted like you like it,” she hands Nicole a cup of hot black coffee.

Getting up, Nicole buttons up her undershirt, accepts the coffee, and plops down gracelessly on her desk chair. She hears a stoic, “Sheriff”, from the door and looks up to see Dolls, as put together and fresh as Wynonna.

“How the hell do both of you look as if we didn’t drink the brothel out of house and home last night?” Nicole mumbles.

“The trick, Red?” Wynonna inclines towards her conspiratorially, “is never to go to sleep, lest you invite the hangover. We found other… activities to partake in after…”

But Wynonna’s story is interrupted by someone unlocking the front door again. “Shit, Wynonna gather Nicole’s clothes and let’s get her out of here quickly. I’ll stall Lonnie,” Dolls moves out of the sheriff’s office and talks with the other deputy, their voices muffled through the door.

Wynonna throws Nicole’s pants at her face, which she quickly accepts and puts on. The bindings and her shirts are packed hastily into Nicole’s saddle bag, as she wraps herself in the vast expanse of her heavy winter coat. Wynonna deposits Nicole’s Stetson on her hear and with one last nod, they head out of the office.

“I was just telling Lonnie that Sheriff Haught and I worked all night on that sensitive case. Thanks again, Wynonna, for agreeing to escort the sheriff back to the homestead,” Dolls lies effortlessly.

Nicole doesn’t speak, hiding her face under the brim of her hat. “Good day, Lonnie,” is all she offers the deputy, walking briskly towards the door.

Both Nedley and Wynonna’s horse are tied off outside and Dolls helps her mount the pinto. They get maybe half a block away from the sheriff’s department, when Nicole feels herself sliding off, and the next time she blinks, she’s lying in a heap of snow.
“Shit. Dolls?! Give me a hand, man!” Nicole hears Wynonna holler and feels herself being pulled up into a standing position. She hears them talk rapidly but doesn’t register their words. The next thing she knows, she’s being lifted onto Wynonna’s horse, sitting uncomfortably close to the older Earp’s back, and sees Dolls tie Nedley’s reins to the back of Wynonna’s saddle.

Nicole is about to object in indignation but the overwhelming sense of fatigue and drowsiness has her body sagging forward against a semi-warm back. Just as the sleep takes her, Nicole hears a heavy sigh in front of her followed by, “You’re one of the good ones, Haught, just so fucking dumb sometimes.”

Waverly hasn’t slept all night, waiting patiently in the kitchen for Nicole to come home so that she could profusely apologize for her actions. She doesn’t know what came over her; she’s really not a type of person to judge others – especially not other women. What is more, she has no right to dictate Nicole’s affairs and deep inside she is actually glad that Nicole has close friends who know her outside of the mess that is this Earp homestead agreement. As tempting as it is to put the blame on the bourbon, Waverly is a woman enough not to take the easy way out.

The minutes turn into hours and by 5 AM Waverly is pacing between the kitchen and the drawing room, peeking through the windows for any signs of Nicole and Wynonna. She’s still remorseful but an itch of irritation enters her bloodstream, as she considers how irresponsible it is of both of them to stay out so late, doing who knows what, and leaving Waverly to fend for herself and worry all night. Between her sister and Nicole, Waverly was certain she could trust at least one of them to be sensible, but clearly, she was mistaken.

The sun is lazily rising over the prairies, as she finally hears the sound of approaching hooves. Putting her coat and boots on, she hears Wynonna’s voice outside, “Wake up, Red. Shit, dude, wake up before Waverly catches your drunk ass.”

Waverly opens the door to the sight of Nicole sliding gracelessly off of Wynonna’s horse and landing on her backside in the snow. Nicole looks at her and mumbles something that sounds suspiciously like, “You are so pretty,” but Waverly decides to ignore it for now.

“You are drunk! And in trouble! Both of you,” she yells at them from the front porch.

Wynonna rolls her eyes and moves to help Nicole up. As they wobble their way to the porch, Waverly steps forward to help support Nicole on the other side. Her arm enveloping the woman’s waist stalls, “Jesus Christ, she’s freezing…”

Once inside, Waverly takes Nicole’s coat off and discovers that the woman is not wearing anything but her flimsy undershirt underneath. “Are you kidding me, Wynonna?” she turns accusingly at her sister.

Wynonna just puts both of her hands up in a gesture of surrender, “Did what I could, kid. She’s awfully uncooperative when drunk.” With a quick, “See you in the PM,” tossed over her shoulder, she vanishes behind her bedroom door, leaving Waverly in the drawing room with a trembling Nicole.

“All right, let’s get you to bed.” Waverly helps Nicole get out of her pants clumsily, maneuvers her into the bed behind the privacy screen, and goes to stoke the fire. The room quickly warms up to
levels even Waverly would consider comfortable.

She mulls over just climbing the stairs to her own bedroom, yet something prompts her to check on Nicole one last time. The sight before her stops her in her tracks – Nicole’s entire body is still trembling, perhaps more so now, even though the room is warm and she’s burrowed underneath heavy blankets. Waverly swears Nicole’s lips turned purplish-blue, although she can’t be certain of it in the dim morning light.

Without a second thought, Waverly strips down to her undergarments and climbs into bed behind Nicole. The fear of hypothermia and the best tactics to keep it at bay have been instilled in her since childhood. Waverly merges as much of her body with Nicole’s back as she can, throws an arm around Nicole’s midsection to keep her close, and hopes it will be enough to thaw her body and stave off the complications.

The sun high and bright outside, Waverly wakes up hours later, warmer and more content than she’s felt since summer. A steady thumping of a heartbeat underneath her ear has her realize the exact reason for the snug comfort – they must have moved in their sleep, Nicole’s now resting on her back with Waverly’s entire body draped over her, head and arm lying on the woman’s chest, while her knee is thrown across Nicole’s lap.

She thinks that the intimacy of their position is entirely inappropriate – she’s never even spent an entire night in Champ’s arms. She thinks she should feel revulsion at such a close physical contact with another woman. She thinks Nicole’s left arm circling her shoulders should burn her with immoral transgression. Yet all that Waverly feels in this moment is warmth, safety, and affection.

They stay entwined for a little bit longer, Waverly silently listening to Nicole’s heartbeat, entirely engrossed in this secure cozy bubble, away from the prying eyes of the outside world. She runs her hand absentmindedly along Nicole’s sternum, glad she managed to make her warm after Wynonna brought her in, frozen as an icicle.

On second thought, Nicole’s warm body prompts Waverly to feel her forehead. How hasn’t she noticed it earlier? Nicole is burning with a fever.

Disregarding the loss of warmth and tranquility, Waverly jumps out of bed in a fury of motion. She’s seen too many people die within a couple of weeks of developing a fever to let Nicole share the same fate. Not on her watch!

She bangs on her sister’s door and moves to start a new fire, not even considering the fact that she’s still only in her undergarments. Wynonna’s head emerges from her bedroom, with a sassy, “Is it at least noon yet?”

Waverly has no time for her sister’s antics, “Put your clothes on and ride to Purgatory to fetch Doctor McDowell. Nicole has a fever.”

“Oh, okay. Let me start on some coffee first.”

“No, Wynonna. Now. You need to leave now.”

Grumbling unhappily under her nose, Wynonna retreats back into her bedroom to dress. Just as she
reappears in the hallway, Waverly regains the vestige of clarity, “No! Don’t bring the doctor over. We can’t have him examine her… Give me a second.”

She rushes upstairs to retrieve a piece of paper and the pen Uncle Curtis gifted her. Scribbling things down quickly and regarding Nicole occasionally, Waverly pushes the scrap of paper into Wynonna’s hands, “Here, ask him for medicine for these symptoms.” She nearly forces grumpy Wynonna out the front door.

Left alone is a silent house, Waverly finally notices the state of her undress and puts the clothes she left on the floor last night – or was it this morning already? – back on. She changes the angle of the privacy screen to make more room and drags a heavy armchair to Nicole’s bed.

Nicole is now curled in a fetal position, clutching the pillow Waverly slept on close to her chest. Her breathing is heavy and labored. Waverly sits by her side, watching her every move, every breath like a red-tailed hawk, but after an hour of inactivity, the restlessness gets the better of her. Setting the kettle on the stove, Waverly paces between the kitchen and the drawing room, pondering what else can be done to heal Nicole.

“Chicken broth! Dang it… I should have asked Wynonna to stop by the McCreadys and get a frozen chicken from Aunt Gus. Maybe our chicks would do? No… they’re not even fully feathered yet… If only Wyatt listened to my requests last year to build a coop, we’d already have full-grown chickens this season,” Waverly’s brain rushes in circles, half blaming herself for Nicole’s state, half thinking of every remedy she’s ever heard of that could cure fevers. The inability to do anything but wait for Wynonna’s return has Waverly agitated and spiraling out of control.

The sound of horse hooves brings Waverly out of the daze – Wynonna’s made it to Purgatory and back in half the time typically required for that distance.

“Here sis, the doc said to mix a teaspoon of this in a glassful of chamomile tea and force her to drink it twice a day, and to rub this into her chest every other hour.” Wynonna, still in her coat and breathing heavily from exhaustion, hands Waverly two amber vials. “He also said to keep a cold compress on her forehead and if the worst of the fever doesn’t dissipate by the evening, to give her a cold 10-minute bath.”

Reading the ingredients on one of the vials, Waverly bunches her forehead in disdain, “Aromatic spirits of ammonia? Calomel? Rhubarb? These are all laxatives! Aunt Gus always says to keep people plenty hydrated when they’re sick – how is this going to help?

Taking her coat off and gracelessly plopping down on the sitting sofa, Wynonna counters nonchalantly, “See, I figured the first thing you’d do is to question and contradict the doctor, so I also stopped by the McCreadys. Gus is on her way, she just had to gather some supplies.”

Waverly’s eyes fill with grateful tears at her sister’s thoughtfulness. For appearing so uncaring and flippant, Wynonna really does have a heart of gold.

She examines the second vial – “Camphor”, the label reads. A sudden idea crossing her mind, Waverly rushes to the kitchen and browses through her dried herb containers. Finding the jar with peppermint, she crushes the herb and blends it together with the camphor in a mortar.

“I’ll rub this into her chest to help her breath better,” Waverly addresses Wynonna, who is still catching her breath back in the drawing room. “Unless you want to…” she offers, suddenly uncertain whether she has the right to take care of Nicole after her behavior past evening.

Her sister gets to her feet quickly, “Nah, saw Red’s boobs last night and that’ll last me a lifetime. I’m
gonna go get that coffee brewing finally.” She walks towards the kitchen with a sly wink.

Mouth slightly agape, Waverly has to physically shake herself out of the shock – Wynonna is likely just baiting her and no such thing had occurred last night.

She moves behind the privacy screen and sits gingerly on the side of Nicole’s bed, running her fingers through the red hair that sticks in wet strands to Nicole’s forehead. She applies a bit of a pressure to Nicole’s shoulder and is relieved to see the woman following her nonverbal directive and turning onto her back.

Unbuttoning the top of Nicole’s undershirt, Waverly blushes at the sight of strong collarbones. She gathers a generous amount of the camphor/balm mixture and rubs it in in soothing circles on Nicole’s chest. Once she’s done, Waverly covers Nicole up with heavy blankets and places a cool wet towel on her forehead.

Aunt Gus arrives shortly thereafter. “I heard what happened, dear. Let me take a look,” she peeks behind the screen. “Oh my, it doesn’t appear to be too good. Here, Waverly, I brought the onion syrup, willow bark extract, and meadowsweet tea – steep them together and try to have Nicole drink some. I’ll get started on the chicken broth.”

Happy to have something else to do than just sit purposelessly, Waverly follows Aunt Gus. They prepare the remedies in a relative silence, the clinking of kitchen utensils the only indication of people working in the kitchen.

They move back to the drawing room, where Nicole kicked the blankets off and is now shivering in her sleep. Aunt Gus sits the bowl of soup on the accent table, while Waverly tries to wake the other woman up, “Nicole. Nicole, wake up.” Receiving absolutely no recognition, Waverly sits on the side of the bed and runs a soothing hand through Nicole’s hair, scratching her scalp slightly.

That does the trick, as Nicole comes to; her brown eyes appear unseeing at first, before they focus on Waverly, confusion clearly evident on Nicole’s face. “Wave…” she croaks.

“Shh… you’ve got a fever. Drink this – Aunt Gus says it will lower the pain and reduce your temperature,” Waverly brings a warm cup of steeped herbs to Nicole’s mouth, who drinks eagerly, scrunching her nose in disgust at the taste. Waverly dries the little droplets that escaped her mouth with a handkerchief, leaving her palm on where Nicole’s shoulder meets her neck and letting her thumb run circles on Nicole’s collarbone – for comfort, she insists, but whether it’s Nicole’s or her own, she’s uncertain.

“Sloppy. Sorry,” Nicole offers, giving Waverly a soft dimpled grin. Their eyes meet, creating a momentarily connection between them, heavy with unspoken things; Waverly is trying to convey her apology for last night and all of the concern she feels for the other woman’s well-being, while Nicole seems to be grateful for the care but also remorseful for reasons unclear to Waverly.

“Nicole, dear, you need to take a better care of yourself,” Aunt Gus interrupts their nonverbal conversation, causing Waverly to jump up and remove her hand from Nicole’s shoulder. “Wynonna gave me an account of last night’s events – an account that I am certain was heavily censored, yet still entirely inappropriate. Next time you find yourself in town at night in a state prohibitive to riding to the homestead, know that our door is always open for you,” she brings a bowl of soup and hands it over to Nicole, sitting down in the armchair placed by the bed.

Nicole sits up in bed and accepts the bowl. Aunt Gus talks to Waverly about how to best break the fever – keep the house warm but well aired, prepare the same herbal mixture every four hours, place a cool towel on Nicole’s forehead, and rub her chest with the camphor from Dr. McDowell. She
applauds Waverly’s idea of mixing peppermint with the camphor, causing her to blush at the praise.

Done with half the bowl, Nicole is visibly losing strength, and gives the dish back to Waverly with a scratchy, “thank you.” She lies down and is asleep again within seconds, Waverly placing a cool towel back on her forehead.

“It’s getting dark out. I should get going,” Aunt Gus announces. “I’ll stop by tomorrow. Try to get some sleep too, dear girl. You’ll be of no use to Nicole if you run yourself past exhaustion.”

Waverly settles in the abandoned armchair with a book and a blanket, getting up only to make some tea or change Nicole’s cool towel and rub her chest with camphor. Wynonna emerges from her bedroom after sunset and sits on the floor by Waverly’s feet.

“How’s she doing?”

“Hard to tell. Her forehead is still warm but I can’t tell whether it’s cooler than this morning or if it’s just my perception of it, since it’s warmer in the house now. She comes in and out of sleep too, so… I don’t know.”

“She’ll be okay,” Wynonna bumps her shoulder against Waverly’s knee in a vaguely comforting gesture. “I bet half of it was just a hangover. We drank a river last night and Haught kept up with the best of us.”

“Sounds like you all had fun last night,” Waverly doesn’t intend for it to come out so harsh but running on little sleep has her brain working slower on filtering and considering most appropriate words.

“Yeah, we kind of did,” Wynonna shrugs her shoulders. “I mean, at first it was sulk central, with Red just pouting about you yelling at her but as the night got darker, the spirits soared higher.”

“Oh god,” Waverly hides her face in her hands, embarrassed.

“She insisted on riding back to the homestead around 2 AM to see you and it took all four us to corral her into her office instead. That’s where she fell asleep. The rest of us just stayed up and talked, sobered up enough to ride back in the morning… They’re good people, you know? Jane and Kate. Their lives are alike mine in many aspects and each of them took the life by the horns and made the best of it – I definitely respect that,” Wynonna is in a rare sharing mood tonight. Or maybe they’re becoming more comfortable with each other in general – it’s one thing to reunite with your sister, it’s another thing altogether to rebuild a bond and that unconditional trust.

“I’m sure they’re lovely people… I hope you know, Wynonna, that I am not quick to judge. I don’t really know what came over me last night. I guess I have a hard time with people choosing company of others over me – and I know, I know, it’s completely unreasonable and unjustified.”

“Hey, don’t apologize. At least not to me. I was an ass towards Rosita too so I hold no higher moral ground here.”

Wynonna is right and Waverly vows to do better in the future; she thinks she should visit Rosita in the new schoolhouse and offer to lend her some of her books, perhaps she could also invite Kate for dinner one evening.

“Kate talked a bit about her experiences with both male and female clients. She said she enjoys both sexes equally, that sure there are differences between the two but she had great exploits with both,” Wynonna offers, apropos of nothing.
That’s an interesting concept that never crossed Waverly’s mind; sure, she knew there were people who preferred same sex partners but people who didn’t have a preference?

“I’m gonna turn in, babygirl. Don’t stay up too late,” Wynonna gets up to her feet, a curious smirk on her face.

Waverly abandons the speeding train of thought before it can derail and cause a havoc in her already muddled mind. She checks Nicole’s forehead and is relieved to find it considerably cooler to the touch.

*Nicole will be okay.*
May, 18X5

Waverly is cleaning out the chicken coop when a two-horse coach pulls up to the homestead. A tall slender gentleman, dressed in a smart suit, exits the coach, a rounded derby hat in his hand. He spots Waverly and walks briskly towards her with a friendly smile on his face.

“Ms. Earp. Perry Crofte, pleasure to meet you,” he extends his hand in greeting. “I asked in town about small privately-owned homesteads and was directed to speak with you. Would you mind if I took an hour of your time? I brought a package of an exquisite chocolate and a bottle of Californian red wine as an incentive.”

The man is cordial and amiable and Waverly can’t see a reason not to talk with him, whatever his business might be. “Yes, of course. Please, follow me,” she walks towards the main house, her head pivoting around for any sign of Nicole.

Nicole recovered fully from the fever within two weeks and with the arrival of warmer weather, she’s been working tirelessly on the homestead, sunrise till well after dusk. Waverly suspects that she feels guilty for missing the first week of spring temperatures; she doesn’t want to consider other reasons for the lack of long conversations and time spent together. Although sometimes it feels like it, Waverly convinces herself that Nicole is most certainly not avoiding her – the winter is gone and, with it, so is the excess of free time that they used to spend in each other’s company.

Inside the drawing room, Waverly offers, “Would you like some coffee, Mr. Crofte?”

“Much obliged,” the man answers, taking a seat on the sofa.

Waverly warms a pot of coffee up and brings two cups to the drawing room.

“You have a lovely home, Ms. Earp. Very tastefully decorated.”

Sitting opposite the man, Waverly blushes at the praise, “Thank you, Mr. Crofte. What did you want to discuss with me today?”

“Straight to business, I see,” the stranger teases lightly with an agreeable smile on his face. “I am riding through the Montana Territory to identify suitable land investment opportunities. You see, Ms. Earp, my father came here from China and made a fortune during the Californian gold rush. My family is well off and quite influential in the city of San Francisco. Yet, I seek prosperity of my own, based on the work that I’ve done, and not something that was simply handed to me by my father. Contingent on the inspection of your land, I am willing to offer you between $0.60 and $0.80 per acre to buy your homestead. We could also discuss a business arrangement wherein you’d be allowed to stay on this land and continue maintaining it as well as a herd of cattle I plan on purchasing, in return being granted 10% of all profits from the operation.”

That’s a lot of numbers for Waverly to process but before she can ask any questions – such as how large a herd is he considering or what would signify land maintenance – Nicole walks in through the front door. She’s covered from head to toe in mud, must have been digging the irrigation ditches from the stream to the fields, and her grimy appearance and filthy overalls are a sharp contrast to immaculate Perry Crofte. She looks at the stranger seated in their drawing room and then inquiringly at Waverly.

“Cole! Mr. Crofte is here with a business opportunity. Why don’t you join us and hear his offer?”
Waverly explains. “Mr. Crofte, this is Cole Haught, Purgatory’s sheriff and my partner on the homestead.”

Nicole shoots her an inquisitive look but Waverly avoids the eye contact. She knows she should have introduced her as her fiancé, convention requires that much, yet the presence of an attractive stranger turns the sour taste of the white lie sweeter.

Placing a few pages from an old gazette on the armchair as not to soil it with mud, Nicole sits down gingerly next to Waverly. “I’m all ears, Mr. Crofte.”

As Mr. Crofte repeats his offer to Nicole and she, in turn, engages him with questions – much like the ones that popped into Waverly’s head – she takes the time to study the stranger. He’s young – possibly Nicole’s age or thereabout – and unconventionally handsome. His short black hair is greased back, his chin is closely-shaved. Every part of his attire screams affluence, fashion, and high society. Men like Perry Crofte don’t pass through Purgatory often.

Waverly allows herself to imagine what it would be like to be courted by and marry someone like Mr. Crofte. Her mind takes her to a dreamland, where she’s standing in an extravagant white dress in an enormous stone cathedral. After a beautiful ceremony, a reception takes place in a splendid ballroom, tables richly adorned by most sophisticated food choices Waverly’s ever dreamed of – lobsters, caviar, ducks, venison, and more!

She envisions a beautiful mansion, that she herself has furnished with an eclectic collection of fashionable furniture. Two black-haired kids run around in mischief, barely avoiding breaking antique vases on display in every room. And then there is a view – a spectacular view of the ocean and the beach. San Francisco is such a modern city, multicultural and open to opportunities. Waverly wonders if Nicole has ever been…

Prompted by the last thought, Waverly turns her head right to look at Nicole, whose eyebrows are scrunched together in concentration. She blinks and sees the opposite side of this alternate-reality coin. Waverly sits alone and lonesome in a grand room, her children sent off to a boarding school at the age of 7 and the likes of Wynonna and Nicole not welcome at the Crofte estate. The city quickly loses its charm – it’s large, rambunctious, and entirely anonymous; Waverly has passed through enough cities with Wyatt to know she’d like to visit them but never settle down in one.

As she’s throwing another luncheon or a dinner party filled with snobbish socialites she hardly knows and couldn’t care less about, she gets a word that Uncle Curtis has passed, his dream of opening a museum never realized after Waverly had left. Without an anchor, Wynonna leaves Purgatory and likely returns to her past life of an opportunistic nomad – Waverly wouldn’t know, since she hasn’t received a letter from her sister in over five years. And Nicole? After losing the homestead, Nicole becomes bitter and resentful, year by year inching closer to a spitting image of Wyatt Earp – a sheriff without a purpose or compassion.

And then, there is the marriage itself – it always seems as if something was missing, as if…

Nicole getting up to her feet in Waverly’s peripheral vision has her snap back to reality. “We’ll consider your offer, Mr. Crofte. Unless you have some other questions, Waverly?”

“No, no. It’s quite all right. Thank you for stopping by, Mr. Crofte, and have safe travels back home.”

After the man leaves, thanking them grandly for their time and gifting them with the promised chocolates and wine, Waverly and Nicole settle in the kitchen, drinking afternoon coffee.
“What did you think?” Waverly asks.

“What do you think I thought, Waverly? The man’s offering 60 cents on an acre for land he’d have to buy for $1.25 from the government – a land that is nearly all proved up with a heavy investment of sweat and money.”

“Well, he said 60 to 80 cents per acre. That’s significantly more than the local cattle barons like Jones or Gardner offer. And what about that partnership deal? We could still stay and work the land…”

“For 10% of the profits? Waverly, didn’t you hear the part where he explained that all the expenses due to maintenance would be our responsibility? That alone would eat up the measly 10% he’s offering,” Nicole answers, more and more agitated and incredulous.

Waverly understands, she truly does, that Nicole’s exhausted and irritated, yet that doesn’t grant her the right to snap at her or to treat her like a child. Their agreement was supposed to be based on a partnership and trust; all Waverly is trying to accomplish with this conversation is to go back to the time when they discussed matters – especially matters of great importance like this.

“Haught pants, there you are!” Wynonna interrupts them, clapping Nicole on her shoulder. “I have a favor to ask. You know how I’ve been thinking recently of getting a job in town and nothing’s really panned out so far? Why don’t you deputize me and we can be work buddies?” She gives Nicole her most innocent smile and bats her eyelashes, almost comically.

Oh boy, is that so not the right time, Waverly thinks.

“No,” comes a short response from Nicole.

“No? What do you mean, no? It’s because of your internalized misogyny, isn’t it? I tell you, I’d be the best deputy this town has ever had!” Wynonna accuses.

“No, Wynonna. It’s because you’re unreliable and a horse thief,” Nicole bites back, her patience already thin after talking with Mr. Crofte and being confronted by Waverly.

“Well, you’re a liar in man’s pants, yet here we are.”

“Real mature,” Nicole stands up, seemingly done with the conversation.

The younger Earp looks at her sister in utter astonishment. On second thought, she should have expected that some of Wynonna’s past actions were less than savory so she shouldn’t be too surprised at the revelation of her being a horse thief. Just like Wyatt.

The sisters hear the front door slam forcefully, followed by the sound of Nedley’s hooves. “Why did you have to antagonize her, Wyn?” Waverly chastises. “We just had an unannounced visit from one Mr. Perry Crofte, who was interested in purchasing the homestead – a subject that is quite sensitive to Nicole.”

“Well, isn’t it to you? Would you ever consider selling the land?”

“I’m not sure. I was trying to talk it over with Nicole when you barged in,” Waverly pouts.

“So talk it out with me, kid. What were the pros of his offer?”

“Hmm… We’d get somewhere around $200 to $250 in cash and we’d be allowed to stay and work the land for a part of the profit.”
“That’s not a lot of money, Waves… What are the cons?”

“You’re right, it’s not so much money… Then there is the fact that the profit share Mr. Crofte was offering was only 10% but maybe it’s something we could negotiate further?”

Wynonna considers her words carefully. “Okay, so clearly there are pros and cons and you can’t really decide. Here, pick a match – if you choose the short one, you’ll sell the homestead, if you choose the long one, you won’t,” Wynonna places two matches in her closed palm, only the tips visible above her fingers.

At Waverly’s hesitation, she prompts, “Come on, pick one. I promise it will give you the answer you’re looking for.”

Still skeptical, Waverly selects a match. She jumps in joy at choosing the right match – the long one.

“See, it worked.”

“How do you mean? What if I picked the short one?”

“You made that decision long before you selected the match. If it was the short one you drew, you’d be upset and you’d know in your heart that you don’t want to sell the land,” Wynonna offers with a shrug.

“I love you, Wyn,” Waverly gives her sister a heartfelt hug. “Even if you are a horse thief.”

“Who knew you could be funny, babygirl?” Wynonna teases. “You’ve come so far. Just don’t let anyone make you forget you’re an Earp,” she adds in a sincere whisper into Waverly’s hair.

Nicole hammers another nail down into a wooden board. She’s been building an extension in the attic opposite of Waverly’s bedroom for the past week. The story they implanted in town was that they needed the expansion for when the kids come after they wed; in reality, Nicole needs more privacy than is afforded by a flimsy screen in a drawing room downstairs.

Waverly and her got back to friendlier grounds after having a heart-to-heart one evening on the porch. Waverly explained she only wanted them to communicate better and that she would never actually consider selling the homestead; in turn, Nicole apologized for shutting Waverly out, claiming it was a result of feeling inadequate after being bedbound for two weeks and all because of a harebrained night out drinking, no less. And certainly, some of it was due to that, but if Nicole is being honest with herself, a lot of her avoiding Waverly was brought about by Jane’s advice to keep her distance lest she gets her heart broken.

Physical labor, day in and day out, 12 hours each day, helped Nicole clarify her feelings and find a resolution within herself. She knows now that her feelings for Waverly are not and never will be reciprocated, that the glimmer of hope she harbored for so long was the culprit of all the miscommunications and bad aura between them.

After taking a step back, Nicole realizes that if her and Waverly are ever to be friends – the type of friends who can trust and support each other unconditionally throughout the entire treacherous journey of homesteading – the responsibility of letting go of her affection for the younger Earp lies entirely on her own shoulders. Every day, Nicole learns to let go a bit more, fighting against every
urge to steal a glance at Waverly when she’s not looking or even simply refusing to engage in a playful banter. The balance between being amiable and affectionate, between friendship and courtship is difficult but Nicole is certain she will get a hold of it eventually.

Sweat dripping off her temples forces Nicole to take a break and trudge downstairs for a tall drink of water. How is it possible that only last month the entire prairie up to the horizon was covered with snow and today Nicole would do anything not to have to work in a heavy button-up.

She arrives in the kitchen, interrupting a conversation. Wynonna – seemingly contrite yet that is such an unbecoming look on her – is nodding her head to something Father Juan Carlo, a local priest, is saying. He’s flanked on either side by devoted church ladies – Mercedes Gardner and Mattie Perley – and the trio cornering Wynonna uncannily resembles a pack of wolves stalking a cottontail.

“Father Juan Carlo, to what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Ah, Sheriff Haught,” Juan Carlo turns around to face Nicole. “We’ve received some… concerns… from the congregation regarding the propriety of your living arrangements at the Earp homestead.”

“You see, Sheriff Haught, an intended or not, a handsome man like yourself living unchaperoned with a young unmarried woman can be a legitimate cause for concern for the virtuous residents of Purgatory. Out of the purity of our hearts, we wanted to inspect your living quarters and, above all, make you aware of other potential accommodations in town,” Ms. Perley provides.

“Well, actually…” Nicole tries to explain but is interrupted by Mercedes Gardner.

“I humbly offer you to stay at the Gardner estate, Sheriff Haught. We have plenty of guest bedrooms and would be honored to share our house with you.” Is she… is she flirting? Nicole looks to Father Juan Carlos who appears as uncomfortable as she feels.

Before she can get a word in, Wynonna snorts loudly, “Ha! You think Red here and my little sister are banging?! Those two are as chaste as the Carmelite Nuns of the Holy Cross! I can assure you there is no adulterating under this roof, no dirty relations, no carnal…”

“Thank you, Wynonna. That’s quite enough,” Nicole tries to wrestle the control over the conversation and save some of her dignity, however little of it is left. “If you’d please follow me to the drawing room, I’ll gladly demonstrate my sleeping arrangements to you.”

Four of them follow Nicole out the kitchen through a narrow hallway, like a bunch of ducklings obediently trailing their mama. “I apologize for the untidiness – I was in a rush this morning, racing the sunrise to start on the work upstairs,” pulling the privacy screen to the side, Nicole scratches the back of her neck, embarrassed at the mess she’s left of her bed. On second thought, the picture in front of them leaves no doubt about how well lived this area of the drawing room is – unmade bed, a union suit hanging precariously off one of the bed posters, and socks abandoned without a care on the floor.

“I assure you, Waverly and I have kept pure and intend to wait until the wedding night. I do appreciate your kindness, Ms. Gardner, but I couldn’t possibly put you out,” Nicole sends a dimpled smile towards Mercedes, maybe a bit too inappropriate for the occasion but hell if she’s not going to work her charms to get out of this situation. “And you, Ms. Perley. Thank you both for your concerns. Purgatory is a better place for having two lovely women like you keeping a watch over its flock.”

Both women blush coquettishly at the attention from Nicole. “You are too kind, Sheriff Haught.”
“Speaking of kind, we’ve heard about the work you’ve done for the schoolhouse and how you managed to reform Ms. Bustillos. You’re doing God’s work, Sheriff Haught!”

Ms. Gardner’s praise vexes Nicole; she hasn’t reformed anyone, which is something those two hypocritical bigots would see if they weren’t busy flirting with her, “Ah! You know what the Bible says – love the sinner, hate the sin!” Nicole also knows that the Bible says no such thing, as she read it numerous times with her brother, Silas, when she was little but the statement rings true with her current guest who all nod solemnly in agreement.

Father Juan Carlo clears his throat, “Many thanks for indulging us today, Sheriff Haught. I’m sure I speak for us all when I say that there is no evidence of devil’s doings in this household. We better get going now.”

At this specific moment the front door opens and a flushed Waverly barges in, “Hey, Nic…” Her holler is stalled as she notices the unexpected guests in their drawing room.

“Father Juan Carlos,” Waverly greets, visibly swallowing the slip of her tongue.

“Nick, you just said?” Ms. Gardner’s eyes narrow in suspicion.

“Oh, yeah, Nick is a nickname Waverly uses… for me… sometimes… since…” Nicole sputters.

“Since Sheriff Haught was so distracted by my baby sister when he first moved in that he’d constantly nick his neck while shaving,” Wynonna helpfully supplies.

“Yes! And we all know how generous Wynonna is with absurd nicknames. This one just stuck,” Waverly jumps at the explanation – a bit too excitedly, perhaps.

“As I was just saying, have a good day and God bless you,” Father Juan Carlo says after a few seconds of an uncomfortable silence pass. He shepherds both women outside, leaving the Earp sisters and Nicole alone at the homestead.

“Shit, that was a close one, Waves.”

“I know, Wyn. I’m so sorry, Nicole…”

“It’s okay. I don’t think they suspect anything. Although… based on the conversation they just had with us, we may want to rethink the timing of the… wedding,” Nicole gets out.

“How so? What did they want?” Waverly asks curiously.

“They were convinced the two of you were banging and wanted to salvage Red’s eternal soul by snatching her to live with one of them.”

Waverly blushes at the insinuation, “Oh.”

“I know we agreed on a winter wedding, Waverly, but we should consider the benefits of an earlier date. It may provide us with a better cover…” Nicole thinks out loud.

“Yeah… Yes. Yes, of course,” Waverly stammers, still blushing daintily. “There is really nothing we have to wait around for and we might as well just get it done and over with.”

Nicole frowns at the unfortunate wording, “Waverly… if you’re not ready or have second thoughts about our arrangement…”

“No, no, no. No second thoughts,” Waverly insists with more conviction now. “You’re right – it will
help tremendously not to have to worry about keeping appearances in town.” After a beat, she adds more excitedly, clapping her hands, “Let’s get married soon! Maybe in August? The sage and blazing stars and prairie sunflowers bloom so prettily in August! They would make such a gorgeous flower crown for me and a boutonniere for you, Nicole! August is a much better choice – who’d want to wed in the winter, anyway?” Waverly’s rambling now, something she is prone to when she’s nervous or insecure.

“Okay, Waverly. As long as you’re sure… Let’s sleep on that idea and we’ll talk it through later, sounds good?” Nicole interrupts the girl, unbridled affection lacing her voice. Goddamn it! There goes keeping her feelings under wraps.

“Thank you, Nicole,” Waverly answers in a quiet yet radiant voice.

Wynonna, seated on the sofa now, follows the scene unfolding in front of her with the raptness of watching a live rodeo show. Thinking ahead and not wanting the older Earp to add her two cents to the already delicate situation, Nicole says, “Hey, Earp, I found you a job in town, if you still want one.”

Thankfully, Wynonna has an attention span of a dog chasing squirrels in an oak grove. “Hell yes! You came to your senses and realized I’d made the best deputy ever?”

She is infuriating, full of herself, and oh so annoying, but Nicole must admit that Wynonna’s brand of overconfidence is also increasingly entertaining. “The answer to that is still no. But! The boardinghouse is still looking for a replacement for Rosita. You any good with mixing drinks?”

“Had some experience… hither and yon. Huh… that could actually be a perfect job for me – free drinks, nights out, minimal responsibility…”

“Wynonna, you can’t be seriously considering this?” Waverly asks, clearly upset – with what? Nicole couldn’t tell.

“I thought you changed your mind about the boardinghouse, Waverly?”

“Yeah, sis. What’s the big deal? I’d be just serving drinks.”

“Remember back in Wichita when our fath… when Wyatt worked at Uncle James’ saloon and you were so upset with him, you up and left? Left me alone, after Willa and mama…” slow tears stubbornly leak down Waverly’s cheeks.

Her sister’s slip of a tongue when speaking about their father doesn’t go unnoticed by Wynonna this time. “Waverly, what is this really about? Why won’t you call Wyatt our father anymore?”

“I should go,” Nicole intends to leave the two sisters alone but Waverly’s hand on her upper arm stops her.

“No. Please don’t go,” those big eyes would have Nicole do anything for Waverly. She nods and stays where she is, hoping to provide some comfort and reassurance.

“I… uhm… I’m not your sister. I wasn’t Wyatt’s. Wynonna, I’m not even an Earp. …”

“Like hell you’re not. You’re still you, Waverly. You are one of the good guys, the best of us,” Wynonna takes the sobbing girl into her arms. “I was Wyatt’s and look how he treated me – I was never as good or as brave as Willa. But, Waves, blood is not what family makes. You have Curtis – not blood related but your largest supporter; you’ve got Nicole now – who saved my ungrateful ass from the Pinkertons though she really, really didn’t have to; and you’ve got me, babygirl. Always.”
“Yeah?” Waverly asks, uncertain and broken.

Wynonna makes an overexaggerated beckoning gesture towards Nicole, clearly expecting her to join in their group hug, “Yeah, Waverly. Always. Right Red?”

“Right. Of course, Waverly… As long as you want me, I will be by your side,” hesitant at sounding trite and cheesy, Nicole responds as sincerely as she can. She gives in and embraces Waverly, who is now sandwiched between the two – an action that finally brings a smile to the younger Earp’s face.

“I’ll interrogate the lot of you about the thing with the Pinkertons in a minute. Just give me this moment to be happy,” Waverly says with a teasing smile on her lips.
June, 18X5

Nicole sits on the rocking chair on the front porch of the homestead, observing the land and listening to the crickets. The little insects chirp the loudest and with the fastest rhythm on evenings like this, when the sun heats the earth and ignites their spirits.

The homestead proper is surrounded by a fence, the attic extension is completed, the chickens are maturing in the coop, and the fields of spring wheat are thriving with the help of the water brought by the irrigation ditches – Nicole looks around herself with an immense pride of how much she’s – they’ve – accomplished in so little time.

Their first two cows won’t arrive until July, then it will be wheat harvesting time and getting it to the market in early September. Sometime in between, there will be a wedding – their wedding. Waverly has already spoken with Father Juan Carlos and made all the necessary arrangements with Mrs. McCready for a little celebration at Shorty’s after the ceremony for the closest friends and family. Nicole wants to help but Waverly Earp is a planner and does not yield the control of it easily.

Tonight marks the first day since the arrival of Spring when Nicole is done with work before the nightfall. They already had dinner, Wynonna leaving for Purgatory shortly thereafter to tend the bar at the boardinghouse, while Waverly is straightening up the kitchen. And Nicole? Nicole is not sure what to do with herself now that nothing requires her immediate attention and so she sits, listens to the crickets, and thinks.

There is one particular subject that has been gnawing at her for the past month or so. Ever since she acquired Edward Sapir’s book on the Southern Paiute language as a Christmas gift for Waverly, she’s been corresponding with Tony Tillohash – a man who helped Dr. Sapir in his linguistic expedition, and who also happens to be from the same tribe that rescued Nicole from the Mountain Meadows massacre.

After spending a number of years in Pennsylvania working with Dr. Sapir, Tony has now returned to the Utah Territory. Once he learned of Waverly’s interest in Native languages and culture, Tony – always so generous and willing to share – invited them over.

Nicole knows that a visit down South is long overdue for her; she hasn’t been in six years. She misses the people, misses Kuttsu Nakka, yet she’s been pushing the visit off in a fear of what she will find because of the recent aggressive, and often times violent, forced relocations of Native Americans into designated reservations.

And then there is the issue of inviting Waverly to come with. Nicole doesn’t want to be presumptuous, doesn’t want to compel Waverly to come on this weeks-long journey, where they’d be forced to share every waking minute in each other’s presence. They are better at being friends these days, found a good balance between being supportive and companionable, and Nicole is afraid they would drive each other apart after spending too much time together.

“Penny for your thought?” Nicole’s rumination is interrupted by Waverly, who sits down in a chair next to her and hands her a steaming hot cup of tea.

“I uhm…” Who is she kidding, Nicole could never lie to Waverly. “I’ve been exchanging letters with someone from the Southern Paiute tribe for the past several months and I was just wondering if maybe now would be a good time to make a trip down South and visit. I haven’t been in years…”
“Nicole, that’s a great idea! June will be much slower, what with the irrigation ditches completed and the crops not needing your attention until late summer. And maybe… maybe you can find something invaluable for Curtis’s collection – I’ll ask him for some money, he’s always eager to pay more than a fair price!” Nicole swears this girl is a ray of sunshine incarnate, always seeing the positive side of things, always optimistic, even though her life has been anything but.

“Oh, yeah. I’d love to acquire something for Curtis… I was also thinking – and this is me just pondering out loud, please don’t take it as me pressuring you or… I don’t know…” Nicole scratches the back of her neck, trying to calm her nerves and focus her thoughts. Buoyed by Waverly’s optimism, Nicole abruptly decides to bite the bullet and hopes it doesn’t come back to haunt them.

Waverly wears a curious and encouraging expression, and allows her the time to gather her thoughts. After a deep calming breath, Nicole continues, “The person I’ve been corresponding with – his name is Tony – he helped Dr. Sapir with that book I uhm… I gave you for Christmas. I kind of mentioned to him that I got that book for you and he… he suggested that you come with… So… I don’t know if you’d even want to come but if you do, we can stay with the band I grew up with and you can spend time with Tony, while I reconnect with my adopted family.”

A soft hand on her forearm stalls Nicole’s rambling speech. When she looks up, Waverly’s eyes are sparkling with something Nicole can’t readily identify. “You’d want me to come with you? On a trip of my dreams where I could experience this disappearing culture with my own eyes? Nicole, I’d love to!”

Nicole wasn’t expecting such an enthusiastic response. At all.

“And I’d be so honored to meet the people who saved you, who cherished and nurtured you to become who you are today. I feel like I owe them one,” Waverly adds with a shy smile.

“Waverly… I want you to know it’s going to take several long weeks to get there and we may have to camp outside some nights. And… well… you’ll have only me for company for those few weeks.”

“Oh, none of that would be a problem for me. I traveled with Wyatt throughout multiple states and territories, remember? Having you for company will be a significant improvement, if I dare say so myself!” Waverly is so excited and cheerful, it’s contagious and soon even Nicole sports a large toothy grin.

“When you put it that way…”

“So what’s the plan? When do we leave?”

“Hmm, I guess we can start gathering the supplies now and be ready to leave by next week? We’ll have to ride down to Butte, where we can catch a train to southern Utah Territory. The train ride itself will take about two weeks so maybe pack a book with you? The endless prairies and deserts are beautiful but the landscape quickly becomes repetitive and unstimulating.”

The air between them is charged with an eager and enthusiastic energy. Waverly bounces in her seat – Nicole can nearly see the cogs turning in her head in planning and preparation.

Nicole can only hope she didn’t make a mistake inviting Waverly to join her.
Nicole stirs the beans in a pot over a fire, checking on Waverly every few moments. They decided to camp at the headwaters of the Missouri River, where three mighty rivers meet at a confluence to feed the Big Muddy, about a riding day away from Butte. Nedley and Bobo – Waverly’s new black horse who sports a few white blemishes on his mane – graze by the river at what must seem as unusually green and luscious grass for them, being used to the dry vegetation of the northern prairies.

Waverly struggles with pitching a tent but she’s headstrong and insists on doing it all on her own. They only have one tent between them, which is enough to sleep two, yet Nicole prefers to sleep by the campfire when there is no danger of rainfall. She took to stroking fires and cooking dinners for them each evening, something that comes to her easily after years of tracking outlaws through the desolate prairies, leaving Waverly to stubbornly wrestle with the heavy fabric. Nicole knows she will ask for help if the task becomes too difficult but she can also clearly see the progress Waverly’s made in a few short days and is not in the slightest concerned about her ability to manage on her own.

The key to pitching the wedge tent is to find a proper balance to support the two poles upright, something that Waverly eventually accomplishes. “It looked soooo much easier when you did it the first night,” she pouts a little but accepts a bowl of beans with a beaming smile. “Cow’s crap, am I hungry! Who knew that riding for hours on end is such a physically exhausting activity? I always thought you just sit there and enjoy the ride.” They share a laugh at that; the air between them undemanding and heartfelt, much to Nicole’s relief.

After she cleans up after dinner and they settle in around the fire, Nicole asks, “Hey, you never told me why you named your horse Bobo? It’s such an unusual name.”

“Yeah, it’s a bit silly, isn’t it?” Waverly responds with a fond smile. “When I was little, after Willa was killed and mama left, I was left alone for most of the time. Wyatt was never around and Wynonna was much older than me and obviously going through the same problems only in a different, more rebellious manner that left no room for a little kid. I invented friends to keep me company and deal with the loss that I couldn’t quite comprehend – one of those imaginary companions was called Bobo and when I saw this horse, my thoughts immediately went back to him. They kind of have a similar appearance and personality.”

“You mean your imaginary friend was four-legged and kind of an asshole,” Nicole teases.

“He was kind of mean, actually, so yeah, maybe,” Waverly laughs it off.

“You know I was really concerned when you decided to buy Bobo and wouldn’t let anyone talk you out of it. I thought you were doing it to save money – they really gave us a great deal on him but it was only because he was such a jerk and wouldn’t let almost anyone ride him. Who knew you’d be such a horse whisperer?”

Waverly blushes at the praise, “Nah, it’s really not me. I think he just hates men, you know? He’s gentle with me and he even lets you brush and corral him, even though I think he gets mixed signals from you.”

“Ha-ha,” Nicole fakes a laugh. “Who knew you were also funny, Waverly Earp?”

They sit in a companionable silence for a few minutes, the fire cracking occasionally, and a picturesque sunset behind their backs.

“How did you deal with your loss? I mean, you weren’t much older than me when you lost your family and I can’t even imagine the trauma you must have gone through,” Waverly inquires quietly.

“I uhm… At first, I was distracted by all the new people and how different they were, their clothes,
their customs, their language. I think I didn’t even grieve for my family until maybe a year later when it all just hit me out of nowhere. At that point… I was kind of ashamed not to have mourned them yet and so I tried to keep busy around the village, always finding somewhere to be and someone to help. It was actually Bison’s Ear who noticed something amiss and had this gentle conversation with me about death and remembering people as a way of always keeping them with us.”

“Do you… do you still remember them?”

“I remember my father and both of my brothers quite well… Oh man, my oldest brother – John Twitty – would have gotten along with Wynonna so well! They share the same absurd sense of humor, although John Twitty also had a penchant for practical jokes… And I think… I think you would have loved Silas – my other brother; he loved books and nature, and was just such a gentle soul.”

“And your mother?”

“I uhm… I remember her singing voice,” Nicole closes her eyes. “She was humming this melody in the front of a wagon right before the massacre started and it stayed with me till this day… I also remember her bright red hair but her face… her face morphs from one thing to another. I think she had blue eyes, like Silas, but maybe they were green? I don’t know… I often times wish I had noticed when it started slipping away from my memory so I could hold on tighter…”

Waverly places a comforting hand on her lap, “Don’t beat yourself up too much over it. I don’t remember Willa much, either. And truth be told, all the memories I have of her involve her being mean or cruel so I try to forget them… And with mama… I know that she’s not dead – or at least I think she’s not – but I also struggle to remember her face. Sometimes I look at Aunt Gus and I think I see something familiar there but other times I think they look nothing alike,” Waverly shrugs her shoulders.

“Would you like to find her one day? Wyatt said that she left right after Willa… Maybe you could understand her reasons better as an adult?” Nicole inquires carefully.

“I don’t know… She abandoned both me and Wynonna, she left me with a man who wasn’t even my father. Rationally, I understand that the pain of losing a child must have been devastating for her but she had two more daughters left and she chose to leave us behind…”

Nicole just nods in agreement.

“But hey, enough of the sad stories,” Waverly declares, standing up and getting ready to retire for the night. The memories are clearly painful for Waverly but Nicole is glad they are in a place where they feel comfortable enough to share the darkest parts of themselves.

“Thank you for talking about your family with me, Nicole. I’m sorry I can’t meet them.”

“Me too… Good night, Waverly,” Nicole says, spreading her bedrolls by the fire.

x

They arrive at the Shivwits reservation two weeks later, the journey by rail not as monotone as Nicole had expected, mainly thanks to Waverly’s company.
The village looks dilapidated and the residents are clearly weary and dejected. Several permanent huts – something Nicole has never seen in her youth with the band – are scattered around with no sense or rhyme; many of them are missing boards in the doors and she can clearly see the poor state of most of the roofs. Multiple wickiups stand erected in a close distance of each other.

This is the exact image Nicole was afraid to discover upon her return – when she left over a decade ago, the Paiute bands were free to roam along the steppes and deserts as their nomadic lifestyle dictated; shortly thereafter, they were forced into large reservations, which due to legislation passed through Congress have been fractured and most of the land sold off to white settlers in recent years.

“Piso Anqa!” Nicole whips her head to the sound of her adopted name. Bison’s Ear stands tall and proud yet considerably older and more weary than she remembers; he’s wearing white man’s trousers and traditional leather moccasins, his torso left shirtless; his long black hair Nicole remembers so vividly is now laced with silver white strands.

She dismounts Nedley and walks briskly towards him, clasping his forearm. Stubborn tears fill Nicole’s eyes, partially from realizing how much she’s missed him, partially because she’s disheartened to see how the native peoples and their way of life are systematically wiped out by seemingly innocuous actions.

Bison’s Ear pulls her into a crushing bear hug – so much for convention. “And you must be the one with a great heart and a greater curiosity, who took Nicole’s breath away,” he shouts over her shoulder.

Nicole looks at Bison’s Ear with admonishment, a treacherous blush spreading down her neck. Looking behind her, she sees Waverly dismounting and sending Bison’s Ear her signature wave and a smile. She seems flushed too but Nicole is too focused at scratching the back of her neck to pay it much heed. Bison’s Ear strides easily to Waverly and gives her a hug as well, whispering something in her ear that Nicole doesn’t catch but that definitely makes the girl blush this time.

Walking back to them, Nicole asks, “So I take it you’ve been talking with Tony?” even though she’s fairly certain that’s the case – how else would he have known about Waverly? She never explicitly divulged her feelings towards the girl in her letters yet apparently Tony picked up on it and decided to share with the rest of the band.

“I should have known…” Nicole shakes her head in disbelief.

“Now, now. Let me show you to your wickiup, you must both be tired,” he walks them towards a small dome-shaped structure built out of grass and straw. A fire pit is located at the entrance to the shelter, leaving the back of it suitable for sleeping.

Nicole looks at the wickiup and then at Bison’s Ear in astonishment – the structure is of a size appropriate for one adult or perhaps a mother with a child. “And I am guessing this is the only available shelter you can provide us, Bison’s Ear?”

“Oh, yes, and I think you will find it satisfactory and much to your liking. I, myself, placed a fresh straw mat inside to ensure you and your woman get a good night’s sleep.”

God, she should know better than to pick up fights with Bison’s Ear. She sputters indignantly, “Waverly’s not… she’s not anybody’s woman. She’s her own. We’re just… friends… and partners on a homestead… and…”
'It’s very generous of you, Bison’s Ear. We both appreciate it,” Waverly chimes in with an easy smile and lack of any displeasure or disapproval. She walks back to their horses to start unpacking, asking the man where she should tie them off to. Nicole is left standing by the hut utterly shocked and slightly chagrined.

She snaps out of it and jogs to catch up with Waverly and Bison’s Ear.

“The night will fall soon. Please join me for dinner once you settle in. You will need to wait for Tony until tomorrow – the men have left on a hunting trip two days ago,” he explains and heads towards one of the wickiup, Nicole suspects to be his own.

“Did he call you Red Baby when we first arrived?” unloading her saddle bags, Waverly sports an amused smirk on her lips.

“Uhm, Red Child, actually… but yeah,” Nicole moves quickly to unburden Nedley and prays to whomever will listen that the heat she feels spreading down her neck is not yet another blush.

“Oh, I’m thrilled to share that with Wynonna and let her know that her nickname for you is entirely unoriginal,” she’s laughing now, full of mirth and carefree.

Nicole can only shake her head in a faked exasperation. If one could die from embarrassment, the Earp women would have been the death of her by now.

They move their belongings to the wickiup, Waverly spreading her bedrolls on top of the fresh straw mat right away, while Nicole loiters outside of the shelter, uncertain. The other girl crawls outside with an easy smile on her face, “Go ahead and set up your bedrolls. I’ll go ask Bison’s Ear if he needs any help.”

“Waverly… I can… I can sleep outside? This wickiup is really not suitable for two…”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We can share. From as little as I know about Native American cultures, I would venture a guess that declining accommodations would be perceived as disrespectful.”

“You’re right but Bison’s Ear should know better…”

“Hey, it’s not a problem. At all,” with a hand to Nicole’s arm and an encouraging smile, Waverly finishes the discussion and trails back towards the shelter where Bison’s Ear disappeared to.

Nicole spreads her bedrolls next to Waverly’s; the small space of the wickiup and the narrow width of the straw mat making it impossible for the two not to be close enough to touch. Using the opportunity of temporary solitude, Nicole closes the wooden door and efficiently unwraps her breasts. She’s kept them bound for the better part of the past three weeks, in fear of being discovered and endangering Waverly, and she welcomes the freedom with a relieved sigh.

Hearing voices outside, Nicole leaves the wickiup to join Waverly and Bison’s Ear. They sit in a communal area, several women now buzzing around, bringing ceramic bowls filled with flat breads, vegetable roots, cactus fruits, berries, and cooked snake meat.

“Bison’s Ear, tell me about Nicole when she was little. What was she like?”

The man considers the question carefully, thoughtfully, as if his answer should decide the outcome to a decades-long war. Eventually, his face twists in a smile. “Little Nicole was plenty of work; with unlimited stores of energy, she was everywhere – helping the women with weaving and picking fruits and vegetables, and helping men with hunting and fishing. You couldn’t stop her if she had her mind set on something – I just resigned myself to letting her make her own mistakes and learn from
them."

"Hey now, you make it sound as if I was a headstrong child!"

"You were. Probably still are," Bison’s Ear nods reflectively. "One time we were passing through a riparian habitat, with those large cottonwoods quite uncommon to the rest of the desert. Someone noticed a large nest high on top of the tree but nobody was foolish enough to climb it, except for Nicole. She was with us for probably about two years at that point. Climbed that tree like a squirrel, grabbed the eggs, but the journey back down turned out to be more challenging than the ascent."

"Oh no! What did you do?" Waverly is clearly enjoying this much more than Nicole would prefer.

"I stayed by the tree and we talked about travels and never losing sight of how to get back home. We are often times blinded by the goal at the end of our journey not accounting for the return trip."

Nicole has always been endeared by his ability to translate common experiences into universal allegories. "She gathered her courage and climbed down the next morning. We shared four delicious eggs for breakfast and caught up with the rest of the band across the stream by the afternoon."

"I think she’s learned her lesson… At the end of the day, she always comes home now," Waverly says with a bashful smile. "How about friends? Did she have many friends growing up?"

"This one was always a leader, had all the children following her every command and getting into all sorts of troubles!"

"Really? You are so level-headed now. Who would have guessed?" Waverly turns to her with an adoring smile on her face.

"It’s not that I intentionally led us into trouble! And the way I remember things, Bison’s Ear is greatly exaggerating – we helped gather vegetable roots and nuts, we set traps for cottontails, we brought back firewood. It wasn’t all just trouble," Nicole defends, smiling at the fond memories, her eyes slightly clouded thinking of those easier times.

"You are correct, my child. The trouble really came with all the hearts you broke in your teenage years," Bison’s Ear guffaws, clearly finding this amusing.

"She was a heartthrob? Oh, do pray tell!" Waverly’s interest seems piqued.

"Ah, yes. Many a young man who grew up alongside Nicole ended up brokenhearted, including my only son whom I vividly remember consoling when he was about 16 springs. Eventually, he understood that Nicole was two-spirited and his advances were not welcomed. I believe they remained friends through all those years."

"Michael was…? Oh… Oh. I had no idea…" This is an unexpected revelation to Nicole, who always considered Bison’s Ear’s son more of a brother and a close friend.

"You were an oblivious youngsters, Nicole, that much is certain, although I never knew why nobody caught your eye. Take Philomena, for example," he gestures towards one of the women a few wickiups over, grinding grains, who quickly breaks the eye contact with the group, "she’s Michael’s wife now but she was as interested in you as he was when you were all young."

"Now you’re just making this up!" Nicole, Philo, and Michael were inseparable as teenagers; she’s happy to see they ended up together but doesn’t believe a single word she just heard. She also didn’t recognize Philo at all – the girl she remembers was lanky, uncoordinated, and awkward; the woman she sees now is… well, a woman.
“Why would I fabricate such a statement, Nicole? Judging from the bashful smile on Philomena’s face, she still finds you attractive. Michael will have some posturing to do when the men get back from the hunting trip.” His typically solemn countenance causes Nicole to find it hard to identify the emotions underneath – is he joking, teasing? Or is he truthfully concerned?

Nicole looks to Waverly for assistance but she is busy staring at Philo with an unusual contempt. *Great.*

“And it would appear somebody else has some posturing of their own to attend to. I’ll leave you to it. Have a restful night,” Bison’s Ear raises from his spot abruptly and offers both of them nods in farewell. Has he always been so inclined to meddling and Nicole never noticed it or is this a new development since he stopped participating in hunts and stays around the village with more time to spare?

Nicole sighs at the retreating form of the man who was the closest she had to a father figure growing up. “Why don’t you change into your sleeping gown in the wickiup, Waverly? I’ll join you when you’re ready.”

“How? Oh, yes. Yes. I’ll go do that,” Waverly is up and on her way before Nicole can blink.

Changing into her sleepwear, Waverly’s thoughts drift to Nicole. Even though they haven’t been here longer than a few hours, the transformation she’s observed in the other woman is astounding – she seems freer, more carefree, and perhaps even more authentic. Waverly didn’t miss the fact that Nicole unbound her breasts as soon as they’ve arrived and how that gesture seems to have liberated her spirits as well.

The acceptance with which Nicole was welcomed back exactly how she is was quite eye-opening for Waverly. Nicole’s attraction to women seems to never have been questioned or challenged here. It also doesn’t seem to be her defining feature within this community. Waverly can’t help but already feel sad for Nicole when they head back to Purgatory, back to the culture that shames, marginalizes, and punishes women like her.

It is absolutely remarkable to be able to experience this little piece of Nicole’s past life, to meet the people who influenced and shaped who she is today. Bison’s Ear is not what Waverly expected at all, although she can see parts of him in Nicole already – his patience, his intelligence, his understated sense of humor.

A soft knock on the door breaks Waverly out of her contemplation. “Are you about done, Waverly?”

“Yes, you can come in.”

With both of them inside, Waverly can appreciate what Nicole was referring to when she mentioned this hut to not be large enough for two. Nicole’s much taller frame causes her to slump until she drops to her knees. Looking through her saddle bags with the last of the dusk light, Nicole retrieves her union suit for the night, “Do you mind if I change here?”

“No, no, go ahead.” Waverly lies down, folds an arm underneath her head, and looks up at the ceiling, giving Nicole some privacy.

“How does it feel – being back?”
“Bittersweet, I guess would be the best way to put it… I’m beyond elated to see Bison’s Ear again yet the way they were corralled into this small territory is difficult to watch. If you don’t mind, tomorrow I’ll spend some time speaking with Bison’s Ear to learn how bad it really is and to see if I can do anything to help – I can do that when you’re with Tony.”

Waverly turns to her side to look at Nicole, “Yeah, absolutely. Let me know if there is anything I can do as well.”

Nicole nods her thanks.

Besides seeing Nicole’s facial expression – which is what Waverly intended by turning in the first place – she is also presented with Nicole’s entire body in its naked glory. She’s sitting on the bedrolls, shimmying into her sleepwear, her side to Waverly. The soft evening light filtering through accentuates Nicole’s muscles and curves; Waverly gazes on in absolute awe at how beautiful this woman is, how much she deserves to be cherished and loved.

Nicole buttoning up her union suit snaps Waverly out of the reverie. What is she doing gawking at people without their consent? She blushes furiously and turns on her other side, preferring to face the wall instead of Nicole.

Waverly can feel Nicole lying down next to her; their bedrolls so close, she can feel her body heat. The night is warm and they both stay on top of their bedrolls for now.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this, Waverly? I must admit that I was afraid to invite you on this journey, in case us spending all this time together drove a wedge between us… I just… I don’t want you to be uncomfortable because of me.”

What an insane notion! Waverly thinks she hasn’t felt as content in her entire life as she has in the past few weeks travelling with Nicole. Inevitably, spending every waking minute with anybody is a difficult task and Nicole surely has certain attributes that drive Waverly up a wall – like her insistence on helping Waverly pitch a tent or her chivalry that borders on ridiculousness at times – yet she feels so happy, so safe, so… so like her genuine self when she’s in Nicole’s presence.

She senses Nicole stirring next to her. Oh, cow’s crap! She hasn’t responded yet, has she? And now Nicole is probably entering that ridiculously chivalrous mode and getting ready to leave the wickiup for Waverly’s comfort.

Waverly’s automatic response is to turn around and throw her arm around Nicole’s waist to keep her in place, effectively spooning the older woman, “No, don’t go! Sorry… I just got lost in thought…” She takes a large breath and blurts out on one exhale, “I’m very happy to have come, Nicole, and please-don’t-ever-think-that-I’m-uncomfortable-around-you.”

She feels Nicole’s belly shaking in a suppressed laughter underneath her palm, “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch a single word you just said.”

Dropping her forehead against the back of Nicole’s neck in embarrassment, Waverly repeats, this time much slower, “I’m very happy that you decided to invite me and… and share this part of yourself with me. And I uhm… I’m never uncomfortable around you. I’m sorry that I made you feel like you constantly have to walk on eggshells around me… I’ll do better.” She squeezes Nicole’s midsection for emphasis.

Nicole’s laughter disappears immediately and Waverly can hear her swallow nervously. “I uhm… Okay, Waverly…”
It sounds as if Nicole wanted to say something else yet Waverly doesn’t want to press. They are both tired after a long journey and Nicole must be emotional to boot, what with reuniting with her adoptive family and finding their lands significantly cropped, and so Waverly burrows in closer to Nicole’s body heat and silently pledges to support her through it all.

“Good night, Nicole,” Waverly whispers into Nicole’s hair.

x

Waverly wakes up gradually, first sensing the smell that vaguely reminds her of vanilla dipped donuts, then feeling a steady heartbeat underneath her palm, and finally registering the overwhelming sense of security. Before she opens her eyes, Waverly knows exactly what position she found herself in, since she’s been here before.

Nicole must sense her awaken, as she awkwardly brings her chin to her sternum to look down at the other girl. “Waverly?” she asks uncertainly, remnants of sleep transforming her voice into a husky rasp.

“Shhh… Let’s not get up yet…”

Nicole drops her head back onto the pillow but her body tenses underneath Waverly. Waverly thinks back to the other morning she woke up tangled with Nicole, the morning when her tranquility was broken by the discovery of Nicole’s fever. She hasn’t thought about that moment until now, her mind focusing on Nicole’s recovery immediately afterwards, and later never leading Waverly back to it. She rubs gentle circles on Nicole’s sternum with her thumb to both relax the other woman as well as comfort and convince herself that this time Nicole is safe.

“Oh do you remember the night when you caught that fever? You were so frozen when Wynonna brought you home, I didn’t know what else to do and so I shared my body heat with you throughout the night,” having her eyes still closed and listening to the rhythmic heartbeat underneath her ear render Waverly more open and braver to speak her mind. “We woke up in a similar position and it made me feel so content and secure… until I discovered you were burning up.”

“I uhm… I don’t remember that,” Nicole admits.

“I figured you didn’t remember… probably didn’t even realize it with how delirious you were these first few hours,” Waverly inhales that calming scent. “Let me have this for a minute longer, knowing that this time you’re not in an imminent danger.”

Nicole’s left arm circles protectively around Waverly’s shoulder and keeps her closer. “Anything, Waverly.”

x

They get up some hours later, well rested and revived after a long journey. Waverly is not too eager to leave the sanctuary of their wickiup but Nicole bribes her with a promise of hot coffee and an introduction to Tony.
They emerge from their shelter to a sight of two men waiting patiently for them. One of them is a slight, slender man, whose face breaks into a large toothy grin when he sees them. His black glossy hair is trimmed short and he’s wearing gray wool pants held up on suspenders over a white cotton shirt.

The second man is a complete opposite of his companion; tall and muscular, with long black hair cascading down his shirtless torso. He stands up and puffs up his chest, putting his hands on his hips. Next to Waverly, Nicole crouches like a mountain lion ready to strike. The two are obviously reading for a fight and Waverly places a trembling hand on Nicole’s arm to prevent her from doing something foolish. How is it possible that not even half an hour ago they were safe and sound in each other’s arms and now Nicole may get a beating? Waverly still vividly remembers the bruises on Nicole’s face and her unsteady footsteps after the fights with Pike and Wyatt.

Instantaneously, the man’s posture deflates, he opens his arms, and his face is transformed by a blinding smile, confounding Waverly who was ready to bolt and find Bison’s Ear in a panicked attempt to prevent a brawl.

“Come here, you red devil!” The man yells at Nicole.

The two embrace in a bear hug, clapping each other on their back with enough force that Waverly flinches sympathetically. “And you must be Waverly,” the man extends his hand to her in greeting. “I’m Michael, Bison’s Ear’s son.”

“And this is Tony,” Nicole continues the introductions, shaking the shorter man’s hand. “Tony, Waverly.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Waverly. Nicole wrote a great lot of things about your intelligence and interest in the Native American cultures.”

“I assure you, I’m probably not as great as Nicole made it seem. I’m just trying to help my uncle describe the native cultures and their traditions, as well as collect the artifacts that would otherwise be lost forever,” flushed at the praise she is certain she does not deserve, Waverly tries to clarify. “But I heard great things about you too! You studied under Dr. Sapir at the Penn Museum, right?”

Nicole interrupts their exchange, “Looks like the two of you have plenty to talk about. Mind if I leave Waverly with you for a couple of hours, Tony? I wanted to talk with Michael and Bison’s Ear.”

“Absolutely. I’d be honored.”

Something has shifted between them last night, something that has been brewing for a while and started to boil over during this trip – Waverly can’t name it yet, but she’s hesitant to part with Nicole.

The other woman must sense Waverly’s uncertainty – she steps closer to Waverly, takes her hand gently, and whispers so that only Waverly can hear her, “Are you okay with that? I can stay if you want me to.”

Waverly wants to simultaneously yell at the top of her lungs in exhilaration and cry her eyes out because Nicole is the only person in the whole world who senses her distress and puts her needs before their own. It’s still such a new feeling for Waverly – to be the center of somebody’s attention, not a second choice or, even worse, someone disposable.

“No, it’s okay. I’m excited to learn from Tony. Come find me later?” Waverly answers in an equally quiet whisper, meeting Nicole’s eyes.
Nicole gives her an easy smile and with one last squeeze of her hand, she’s gone.

Waverly faces Tony, “Let me grab my notebook and I’ll be ready.”

They share breakfast and coffee together, exchanging stories about their lives. Waverly learns that Tony is quite a few years younger than Nicole and was but a boy when she left the band. He tells her of his years spent in Pennsylvania helping Dr. Sapir. As their conversation moves onto beliefs and mythology, there is one legend that particularly sticks with Waverly.

“Nicole has mentioned that you experienced losing a loved one in your life, as many of us will at some point. Michael lost his mother when he was but a few springs old and with Nicole’s entire family gone in that senseless massacre, they bonded over that universal experience.”

“Do you think there is something in the Southern Paiute culture that helped her deal with death better? I’m still at awe with how she’s managed not only to survive the massacre but also to not allow it to define her. My go-to emotions when thinking about my sister’s death is still to this day anger and resentment, whereas I never heard or felt Nicole harbor such negative feelings.”

“There is something to what you’re saying. We respect death and see it as an inherent part of life. Have you ever heard the story of the Wolf and the Coyote?” Tony asks thoughtfully.

“No, can’t say that I have.”

“We believe that Esa, the Wolf, is the god creator of all things. He has a younger brother – Coyote, who sometimes assists his brother in performing good deeds for the people, but he possesses a spirit of a trickster and most of the time is up to no good.”

“Tell me about mischievous siblings!” Waverly laughs good-naturedly.

“I can already see that you will understand this allegory, Waverly,” Tony offers her a warm smile. “Esa was believed to have the ability to bring all living things back to life by shooting an arrow underneath them. Not particularly fond of the humans, the Coyote constantly argued with his brother that if he continued to bring the dead men back, soon there would be no room left on earth. His wicked plan was two-fold – if his brother heeded his advice, soon there would be less people on earth and the ones who remain would grow to hate the Wolf, for he squandered his ability to bring back their loved ones.”

Waverly listens carefully to the legend; her mind scanning through the mythologies of other cultures to find similarities. The first thing that she thinks of are the Scandinavian gods Thor and his younger brother Loki, who seem to share an uncanny resemblance to the Wolf and the Coyote.

“In his wisdom, Esa had understood much earlier that he cannot continue to bring back the dead forever yet the decision was difficult due to his love for the people. The day when grief-stricken Coyote appealed for him to save his son who was bitten by a Rattlesnake, the Wolf resolved to both teach his little brother a lesson and instill the devotion to life in people – he didn’t shoot his arrow under Coyote’s dead son’s body that day and from then on, did not use his power on anyone else.”

“Did the people resent the Wolf as the Coyote wanted?” Waverly asks, fully engrossed in the myth.

“No, the people continued to love Esa; he’s taught them to cherish the life they were given and to grief for the loved ones who died.”

“That’s a beautiful tale, Tony.”

Waverly hasn’t noticed people gathering around them and is surprised to hear Michael’s voice
behind her, “Nicole and I always fought about which one of us is Esa and who is the Coyote. My father eventually settled the argument, pronouncing us both Coyotes.”

Nicole sits down next to her and whispers into her ear, “Everything okay?”

Relieved for some reason to have Nicole back with her, Waverly gives her a nod and scoots closer.

“Ah, I see we have everyone now. Waverly, we wanted to share one of our more important traditions with you – the Round Dance. The pine-nut harvest time will arrive soon and we perform this dance to affirm the unity within the band and focus our minds on the harvesting task.”

Tony leaves Waverly’s other side and sits a few feet away, several people forming a circle around him, joined by hands. He begins to hum and then to sing; Waverly is surprised to note that there are no instruments involved other than Tony’s voice and people clapping outside of the circle. The song is beautiful and there is something mystical about the circle of people moving around him in a clockwise direction.

Engrossed in the experience, Waverly realizes that she’s heard that song before. “You hum the same melody sometimes when you’re working,” she whispers to Nicole, taking her hand in her own and placing them in her lap.

“I do?” Nicole sounds surprised.

“Yeah. Quite often actually.”

They smile at each other stupidly, until Waverly forces herself back to the present, to this spectacular event she will most likely never have the privilege of experiencing again.

x

When they retire to the wickiup for the night after a long and eventful day, Waverly drapes her body around Nicole’s without a hesitation or a second thought.
August, 18X5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

August, 18X5

Nicole tosses and turns in her bed in a brand-new attic room, unable to find a comfortable position. Ever since they returned from the Utah Territory, her body has refused to accept companionless sleeping arrangements. Her bed feels too large, the blanket’s too light, and the morning temperatures are too chilly without additional body heat to share.

During the week they spent with the Southern Paiute band, Waverly took to cuddling with her at night. Nicole suspects a part of it was owing to the limited space they had available in the tiny wickiup. Another reason was likely Waverly’s way of providing and seeking comfort after the long days spent within a completely different culture – after all, she had two sisters growing up and it seems like an entirely ordinary way of sharing closeness with the people most familiar to you.

Seeing the first signs of dawn filtering through, Nicole decides to put herself out of misery and simply get up. She has enough to accomplish on the homestead today to warrant an early start – their wedding is scheduled for the day after tomorrow and the custom has it that the groom shall not see the bride for 24 hours prior to the ceremony; Nicole will ride to Purgatory tonight and spend the following two nights in the room upstairs of Shorty’s.

She’s not nervous for the wedding or what will come afterwards. If anything, Nicole’s looking forward to it – the past several months have proven that Waverly and she will be the most suitable partners and great companions. The fact that she may not get to experience sharing her life with someone who reciprocates her love does not bother her as much as she thought it would. After all, the romantic love is not the be-all-end-all requirement for a fulfilling life. Spending her life homesteading and supporting Waverly in all her endeavors are certainly worth the small price of unrequited love.

Sneaking quietly down the stairs as to not wake Waverly up, Nicole gets accosted by Wynonna, slouching on the sitting sofa with a bottle of bourbon, “Heyo, Red.”

The drawing room is still shrouded in darkness, the first ray of sun hitting the back of the house. Nicole would have walked right past the older Earp had she not announced her presence. “Holy cow on a prairie! Wynonna! What the hell? What are you doing here at this hour?” Nicole whisper-yells, still cognizant of the sleeping girl upstairs.

“Waverly couldn’t sleep when I got back from my shift at the boardinghouse so we hung out and talked. Now, as you can see, I am enjoying this sublime bottle of rye,” Wynonna demonstrates by slushing the golden-brown liquid in a bottle in Nicole’s general direction. If her sour expression is any indication, there is nothing sublime about that rye.

“Is everything okay with Waverly?”

“God, of course your first instinct is to ask about Waverly! This is useless,” Wynonna’s words are teasing but her tone is serious, stopping Nicole in her track. “Come, share a drink with me.”

“It’s 6 in the morning, Wynonna,” Nicole admonishes but sits down on the sofa and accepts the drink, sensing the older Earp to be in a uniquely earnest mood.
Long minutes pass before Wynonna speaks again, “I never told you I was sorry for reacting the way I did to your presence at the homestead and for outing you to Waverly… I should have given you a chance, given Waverly the option to decide for herself. But instead I pulled her in too close. You know, I used to think that things would get too hard and that you’d go and… and leave my sister with a broken heart.”

Wynonna delivers the last statement with so much sincerity, looking Nicole right in the eye just like Wyatt used to. Nicole knows how much the homestead means to Waverly and she feels an overwhelming urge to defend herself, “Wynonna, I’d never leave Waverly unless she wanted me to. I uhm… I love her.”

“Eww,” Wynonna scrunches her face in an exaggerated disgust, causing Nicole to panic for a fraction of a second – she assumed she wore her feelings for Waverly on her sleeve and even felt an understated support from Wynonna but what if she was wrong?

“And also, you better,” Wynonna bumps her shoulder against Nicole’s in a vaguely affectionate gesture. “You know that she cares about you too, right? It’s not all one-sided.”

Relieved at having misunderstood Wynonna, Nicole is quick to say, “Oh no, I know, I do. It’s very easy to see – Waverly is so giving and so caring; I couldn’t have asked for a better partner for homesteading. I just hope that our friendship doesn’t keep her back.”

“It’s not what I meant, stupid. Waver…”

“What are you guys doing up so early?” Waverly appears in the hallway, a blanket thrown over her shoulders, her eyes still clouded with sleep.

“Nothing,” Nicole shoots up to her feet, nearly dropping the tumbler of bourbon on the ground in her haste, earning an eyeroll from Wynonna.

“Just having a chat with my future sister-in-law,” Wynonna responds with a mischievous grin. “Want to join us?”

Waverly shuffles closer and collapses on the sitting sofa in the spot vacated by Nicole, her head landing on Wynonna’s lap. “’S too early.” She’s out like a light.

Both Wynonna and Nicole look at the sleeping girl with unbridled affection but neither one says anything more in fear of waking her up. Nicole gives Wynonna a parting nod and heads outside to draw water out the well for their morning toiletries and to bring firewood to stoke the kitchen fire.

Nicole puts the kerosene lamp out and lies down. She’s spending the night in the little room upstairs of Shorty’s. The two periods of time she rented this room before were some of the lowest points of her life and she hopes the third time is a charm.

Drifting off to sleep, she hears a soft rapping at her door, much gentler and more timid than Mrs. McCready’s. Nicole grabs her Colt revolver and walks to the door, “Who is it?”

“It’s uhm… It’s Waverly.”
Panicked, Nicole yanks open the door and pulls the girl inside, checking for any signs of injury or distress. *Did something happen on the homestead when Nicole was gone? Why else would Waverly be in Purgatory, seeking her out in the middle of the night?*


Waverly blinks at her owlishly, “Oh, yeah. Yes, everything is fine. I just… I needed to talk with you.”

Nicole deflates in relief, letting go of Waverly’s upper arm. She walks towards her bed to deposit the revolver on the bedside table and sits down to listen to what she has to say.

Waverly avoids her eyes and starts pacing the length of the room – Nicole suddenly has a vivid déjà vu of the New Year’s Day months ago, when Waverly stormed into the exact same room, setting the conditions for their agreement.

The silence continues and verges on uncomfortable, Waverly striding back-and-forth seemingly lost in thought. Her brows pulled in a frown cause Nicole’s brain to spin again. Waverly is clearly agitated and whatever it is she needed to talk about must not be an easy topic. *Is she having second thoughts about their arrangement? Does she want to call off the wedding?* Whatever it is, Nicole would do anything to wipe that frown off of Waverly’s face and replace it with a smile but for now, she gives Waverly the space and time to verbalize her thoughts.

Eventually, Waverly says, without breaking her pacing, “Before Christmas, before I learned your true identity, I bought you… well… I bought Cole a pocket watch.” She finally stops and pulls a little wrapped box from her coat’s pocket and hands it to Nicole, yet she still doesn’t meet her eyes, preferring to stare at her feet.

“I was falling hard and fast for him and I wanted to gift him with something that would hold a significance – something that would express my feelings of gratitude and affection – and replacing that shattered watch seemed like an ideal present.” Waverly finally looks up, “I never gave it to you, since it was a gift for Cole – Cole who was chivalrous, caring, and loyal; Cole who stood up to Wyatt and who supported my interest in anthropology; Cole who *stayed*, even when Wyatt announced his imminent departure.”

Nicole knew about Waverly’s feelings for Cole but hearing her talk about it in depth, with a clearly heartbroken expression painting her face, she can’t help but feel ashamed and crestfallen again, after causing all this unnecessary pain. “I’m sorry, Waverly…” Nicole croaks.

Waverly stands there and looks at Nicole with large vulnerable eyes, “No, it’s not that… I want… I want you to have this watch, Nicole.” Responding to Nicole’s confounded expression, Waverly urges, “Open it.”

Nicole unwraps the gift and removes a beautiful timepiece from the box – its hunter case is embellished with intricate designs and the face sports stylishly calligraphed Roman numerals. Nicole senses the significance of Waverly deciding to gift it to her after all these months but the precise implication of it remains clouded to her.

“It’s beautiful, Waverly. Are you… are you sure you want me to have it? It was, after all, intended for Cole,” Nicole whispers, searching Waverly’s face.

The other woman takes a few steps towards Nicole, sits next to her on the bed, and encloses the watch in Nicole’s hands with her own. “I do. I do, because I finally realized something – I realized
that while Cole was all of those things, you, Nicole, are all that and more. You are warm and supportive and giving, and you’re not afraid to be vulnerable in my presence. You taught me to be myself and to be brave. And this? This is me finally being brave.”

“Waverly?” Nicole croaks out, even though she doesn’t even know what she’s really asking. Her heart is thumping viciously in her chest, her palms are cold and sweaty, and she gets tremendously lightheaded. It sounds like Waverly is telling her she is open to the possibility of them being more, more than just partners on the deed, more than just friends. But could it be?

Instead of responding verbally, Waverly inches closer to her and connects their lips, softly at first, their noses bumping against each other awkwardly. Waverly’s hand caresses her cheek with so much care and caution, Nicole opens her eyes to look at her. She meets Waverly’s eyes, so open and vulnerable yet also hopeful and happy.

Nicole asks, because she has to, because this is an unexpected turn of events that she hasn’t seen coming, because what if Waverly is confusing her feelings of affection for love and attraction? “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” comes a whispered, bashful response. “Yes. I uhm… I do love you, Nicole Haught. I really, really do.”

Nicole’s eyes fill with tears and she kisses Waverly, trying to express every suppressed emotion, every last drop of affection, through this simple act.

“I love you, too, Waverly,” she whispers once they break apart.

“Marry me? Not as Cole Haught, but you, Nicole – would you… will you marry me?” Waverly’s voice sounds bubbly and cheerful yet also cheeky and perhaps a bit shy.

Nicole kisses her again, because she can, because this beautiful angel just asked her to marry her, because she’s afraid it’s only a dream and she doesn’t want to miss another second not kissing Waverly Earp. She whispers a quiet, “yes, yes, yes,” against Waverly’s lips, lips that stretch in a beaming smile and ruin their kiss.

Adjusting her body more towards Waverly in this awkward sideways sitting position, Nicole is not deterred in the slightest and continues to pepper soft kisses on Waverly’s cheek and down her neck. She still can’t believe this is really happening; her heart is racing and her hands – rested uselessly on her lap – are starting to shake uncontrollably. Yet it is all too easy to get lost in this feeling, when Waverly’s skin tastes so sweetly and she keeps gasping and humming approvingly whenever Nicole finds a more sensitive part of her neck.

A steady hand rests atop her shaking ones – calming, reassuring, soothing. Nicole stops her explorations and looks into Waverly’s eyes – eyes that hide no doubt or hesitation, but rather radiate joy, strength, and conviction. Waverly’s right hand comes up to caress Nicole’s neck, as she brings their foreheads together, still smiling softly, still providing Nicole the strength to collect herself.

After a few calming breaths, Nicole straightens her back, separating their foreheads, and gives Waverly a tentative smile. She thinks she would have felt embarrassed to have fallen apart in front of any other pretty girl – but this is not any other pretty girl, this is Waverly who would never judge her for showing vulnerability. Nicole’s hand stalls halfway through to her neck – no, she doesn’t need her crutch, her calming gesture; she has Waverly now.

She’s met with Waverly’s beaming smile, as the girl climbs onto her lap to gain a better vantage point – it seems that she needs the physical connection as much as Nicole does in this moment. Waverly’s
lips are still soft and pliant, yet also more demanding and confident now. The second she feels the tingling sensation of Waverly’s warm, exploring tongue on her lower lip, Nicole’s hands snap out of their dumbstruck hibernation and seize Waverly’s outer thighs, grabbing for her dear life.

With the added weight of the girl in her lap and no way to support them both – what with both of her hands now occupied elsewhere – Nicole loses her balance and they fall backwards onto her bed.

Waverly starts giggling into her hair and moves her body off of Nicole to lie down on the bed next to her, “That was the scariest thing I did in my entire life.” Supporting her weight on her elbow, she’s facing Nicole now, still smiling, and runs a hand up and down Nicole’s arm, “Can I stay with you tonight?” she whispers with a hint of uncertainty creeping in.

“Yes, please. God, you have no idea how poorly I’ve slept since we got back from the Utah Territory,” Nicole almost whines and pulls Waverly closer to her chest. With her nerves dissipating thanks to Waverly’s soft gestures of assurance, it is her turn to reciprocate, to be the rock Waverly may need in the days to come when the dust settles down. Nicole knows they will have to talk it out – hell, she has so many questions – but tonight is not the time.

She feels the girl exhale deeply and burrow closer under her chin, “Me too. I haven’t had a proper night’s sleep in weeks…”

They fall asleep entwined in each other, as if they were sharing a narrow mat in a tiny wickiup again instead of a large four poster bed.

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Waverly startles awake at the sound of someone banging at the door.

“Waves, you in there?” Comes Wynonna’s concerned voice.

_Cow’s crap! _She can’t open the door – how is she going to explain having spent the night with Nicole? Judging upon how Wynonna reacted to Nicole’s true identity and the proposed marriage between them, she is fairly certain what her sister’s response would be had she known that Waverly had romantic feelings for Nicole.

She also hasn’t really gotten this far thinking about what loving Nicole would entitle. Hasn’t considered there would be other people in their lives with _opinions _about _their _relationship. It was easy to be brave for Nicole but being brave for herself?

“Red, I swear that if you don’t open this door soon, I’m gonna kick it in!”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Waverly looks to Nicole in trepidation but the other woman is as calm as ever and gives her a simple, encouraging smile, “It’s your decision whether you want to open the door or not, but I have a feeling you have nothing to worry about from Wynonna.”

_As if! _Did Nicole hit her head and doesn’t remember how irreconcilable Wynonna was?

“I also don’t think that door will hold her much longer.”

Waverly has to agree that Nicole has a point there and, resigned, she goes on to let her sister in.

“Finally! You both decent?” her sister asks to Waverly’s utter astonishment. She can vaguely feel her
mouth hanging open yet she can do nothing about it – her brain is frozen and doesn’t relay any orders to the rest of her body.

Wynonna barges in with something thrown over her forearm and pulls a chair closer to the bed, with a cursory, “Haught,” thrown at Nicole still lounging in bed in greeting.

Waverly is still frozen to a spot by the door, when she hears Nicole ask, “You knew?”

“Did I know? Did I…? Jeez, how many fucking times have I tried to talk to both of your oblivious asses about this? Huh? I had some suspicions earlier but Waves losing her cool and having a jealous meltdown because you hung out with Kate and Jane pretty much confirmed it,” Wynonna shrugs her shoulders as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“I did not have a meltdown,” Waverly snaps out of her stupor, stomping her foot petulantly. Both women look at her with raised eyebrows, and yeah… maybe she was a tiny bit jealous?

“Anyway, don’t run off like that in the middle of the night next time, babygirl, would ya? Got me kind of worried this morning.”

“Oh… sorry?” Waverly apologizes, embarrassed – in her hurry to get to Nicole and pronounce her feelings before they wed, Waverly hasn’t even considered letting Wynonna know where she was going.

“Here. Gus wanted me to give you this,” Nodding in acknowledgment of Waverly’s apology, Wynonna hands her a folded cloth.

Pushing the gift away with both her hands, Waverly is not ready to change the subject, “Wait, wait, wait. Does this mean you’re okay with this? With me being with Nicole? You used some strong words when you first discovered Nicole’s gender.”

Wynonna shrugs, “From where I stood, it looked like you were being tricked into something you weren’t fully aware of, Waves.” Glancing at Nicole, she hastily adds, “No offense, Red.”

“None taken.”

“Now though… It doesn’t take a Pinkerton to see the affection and support you two have for each other. You know, I thought about it and I couldn’t name one man I know that would treat you better or with equal respect as Red does. So yeah… Go be merry and gay, I guess.”

Having her sister’s approval, even if it’s not the most eloquent or tender, is something Waverly hasn’t realized she craved until this very moment. She throws herself at Wynonna, clumsily trying to hug the sitting woman.

If the embrace is awkward, her sister is even more so, as she pats Waverly perfunctorily on the back and clears her throat, “Uhm, so yeah. Here, take this.” She pushes a folded cloth into Waverly’s hands, clearly uncomfortable with the display of affection in Nicole’s presence.

As Waverly carefully unfolds it, the gift turns out to be the most gorgeous, embroidered white dress she’s ever seen.

“Gus said mama got married in that dress. She thought you may want to wear it…”

“It’s… it’s lovely,” Waverly pulls the dress close to her body but there are no mirrors in the room so she has to look down at herself to see how it looks. She spins around, earning a chuckle from Nicole. “I’ll go to Aunt Gus’s and try it on.”
Waverly runs out the door and down the stairs in excitement before realizing she isn’t wearing shoes. She skips the steps back two at a time and barges back into Nicole’s room. Grabbing her shoes, she hastily approaches Nicole, now seated on the edge of the bed, and gives her a quick peck on the mouth, causing the woman to blush and rub the back of her neck adorably.

“I’ll see you in church in four hours,” Waverly throws over her shoulders, leaving to try the dress on and thank her aunt.

x

Waverly stands by Wynonna and, sipping on a carbonated water, examines the people who came to Shorty’s to celebrate their marriage. The ceremony was everything and more than Waverly hoped for. It was nothing like the exuberant and pompous wedding ceremonies she envisioned in the past and it was so much better for it, so much more sincere and genuine.

Uncle Curtis walked her down the aisle to the altar where Nicole stood tall and proud waiting for her in a Prussian blue suit that complimented Waverly’s flower crown perfectly. Waverly got lost in those expressive brown eyes and that stupid dimpled smile on Nicole’s face and didn’t pay attention to whatever it was Father Juan Carlo was droning on about. Wynonna – in her capacity as a bridesmaid – elbowing her was her only indication to say those two magical words that would bind Nicole to her forever.

I do.

Waverly still cannot quite believe that two simple words was all it took to join them together. Yet standing at Shorty’s with her progressively drunker sister and looking at an exuberant Nicole surrounded by the Jones’s boys, Waverly feels that whatever transpired in the church during their wedding ceremony has really created a tangible bond between them. Nicole appears to feel the same, as she’s stealing glances in Waverly’s direction every minute or so, seeking the connection and comfort, even though she’s clearly immersed in a jubilant conversation with Dolls.

Aunt Gus and Uncle Curtis approaching her brings Waverly back to the present.

“We are both so proud of you, Waverly.” Aunt Gus gives her a warm, all-encompassing hug, adding in a whisper, “Remember – some of the best things in life are the surprises it throws us. You’ve always been an honest kid. Don’t stop now.”

The statement causes Waverly to blush – it sounds like Aunt Gus is implying that she knows there is something more between her and Nicole, without even a hint of disapproval. She never knows where her aunt stands and thinking about this now makes her head spin. With all the events and emotions of the past 24 hours, unpacking what Aunt Gus just said may have to wait until Waverly’s mind is ready to tackle it.

Smiling at her fondly, Uncle Curtis saves her from having to respond, “Your aunt and I wanted to give you something exceptional on this special occasion. We purchased the lot of land next to the schoolhouse and plan on building the museum we always talked about there. We even enlisted the help of Ni… uhm… of Cole, who enthusiastically agreed to spearhead the construction.”

Waverly looks over her uncle’s shoulder and is met with Nicole’s warm eyes set on her already and a little nod in acknowledgement. She can’t help but beam back at Nicole, because of course she would
offer to help with the build and realize Uncle Curtis’s lifelong dream.

“Between running the saloon and our respective responsibilities within the town’s council, we know neither one of us would be able to give the museum all the attention it will require and deserve. We’ve decided to offer you the position of the museum director and give you the free reign over the collection selection.” Uncle Curtis’s words snap Waverly’s attention from Nicole back to him. Did he just?

“Did you just… You want me to run your museum? Uncle Curtis… I’m not even remotely qualified…”

She feels Nicole stepping next to her, offering a comforting presence and support. Needing to feel more grounded, Waverly snakes an arm around Nicole’s waist and immediately experiences a sense of calm and belonging rush over her.

Uncle Curtis looks down at them both with a kind smile adorning his face, “Dear girl, you are more qualified than you give yourself credit for. What is more, I am certain you will go above and beyond to do this project justice.”

“Thank you. Thank you both so much,” Waverly lets go of Nicole and hugs Uncle Curtis and then Aunt Gus.

“It’s time for you two lovebirds to hit the road. People are already piling outside to see you off,” Wynonna interrupts their moment.

Sure enough, Waverly notices the inside of Shorty’s is nearly entirely empty now and she can see people amassing outside with pots and pans and guns to see the newlyweds off according to a rambunctious tradition of shivaree.

Waverly feels Nicole connect their hands – it seems like the woman is needing this little comfort as much as Waverly does – and hears a quiet, “Are you ready?”

Squeezing Nicole’s hand in confirmation and taking a deep breath, Waverly walks them outside the saloon. A large group of people gathered there in two parallel lines, creating a sort of a pathway for them to pass through – some of the people attended the ceremony but Waverly also sees many more faces of townsfolk eager to cause a bit of a commotion and witness their sheriff riding off.

Nedley stands calmly, tied off to the hitching rail in front of Shorty’s, unperturbed by the ruckus. Waverly notices Dolls tying something to the back of Nedley’s saddle with a mischievous smile on his face but she can’t see what it is from this angle. The custom has it that the newlyweds ride off together on one horse and Waverly is glad it is Nedley they chose and not Bobo, who would most definitely be antsy with the gathered crowd.

Nicole mounts the horse, scoots back in the saddle to make more room, and extends her hand to Waverly to pull her up. Wearing a wedding dress forces Waverly to sit sideways, which proves to be less than comfortable in a Western saddle not designed for it. The saddle is definitely too small for two, yet in this moment Waverly feels snug and cozy to be enclosed so intimately in Nicole’s arms, feeling Nicole’s chest rising with every breath.

As Nicole directs Nedley away from the saloon and through a crowd of people making ungodly noises with the pots and pans, as well as yelling and shooting their guns in the air, Waverly notices a string of empty cans attached to the saddle, dragging behind the horse, and adding to the general ruckus. That must be what Dolls was tying off and it is a pleasant thought to be carrying some of this overall excitement with them all the way to the homestead.
“I’ll be staying at Shorty’s for the whole week but don’t get my little sister pregnant right away, ‘kay Red?!” Wynonna hollers behind them, earning a hearty guffaw from the crowd, as well as an abashed blush from Waverly. She burrows closer to Nicole – if that’s even possible – and hides her face in Nicole’s chest, inhaling the calming smell.

Nicole’s arm tightens around her waist, as she whispers a comforting, “Hey, it’s okay. Pay Wynonna no heed. You know I have no expectations from tonight, right? We’re going at your pace, Waverly – always have and always will.”

Once they leave Purgatory proper and the racket dies down, except for the soft clanking of cans behind them, Waverly angles her head away from Nicole’s chest and meets her eyes. How did she get so lucky to meet this absolutely impeccable human? Sometimes it feels like Nicole is reading her mind and always has the perfect thing to say to assuage Waverly’s fears, her concerns, and her anxiety.

The sun sets picturesquely over the Little Rockies behind them, bathing them and the surrounding prairies in a soft orange light, setting the most suitable scenery to the end of this perfect day. The crickets are softly chirping their evening rhythm, while the dried grasses swayed by the gentle wind add their melody of a soft susurrus to the prairie song.

In this moment, looking into Nicole’s soft genuine eyes, Waverly knows, is certain beyond any question, that she wants everything with this woman. She wants to cherish and cultivate the friendship and partnership they’ve created. Yet she also wants, no – she needs… yearns for, really – the intimacy, affection, and awareness that is only granted through lovemaking.

Waverly is nervous at the prospect of crossing that last barrier between them but she also trusts Nicole to guide and protect her through the entire experience. Her thoughts are too brazen for Waverly to verbalize so instead she softly places a palm on Nicole’s face and angles it down so she can claim her lips in a kiss that she hopes expresses her desires.

When the kiss ends, Nicole exhales loudly against her lips and whispers, “You’re a sweet shot of kerosene, Waverly Earp.”

“Waverly Haught,” she corrects. It makes her feel giddy to finally have a sense of pride and belonging in her last name, and so she giggles, light and free and so utterly happy that nothing could confine her mirth.

She stops giggling abruptly and swallows heavily when she looks into Nicole’s eyes and sees a fire burning within unlike anything else she’s ever seen.

“God, Waverly. If you keep it up, I won’t be able to concentrate on steering Nedley. Let me get us home safely.”

“You are my home, Nicole. Regardless where we are, I know I will always find home in you.”

~The End~
Thanks for coming on this journey with me and enjoying the historical references as much as you did. It was a blast!

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